

AN ABSENT HERO

MRS. FRED. REYNOLDS



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AN ABSENT HERO

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AN ABSENT HERO

BY

MRS. FRED REYNOLDS

AUTHOR OF "A QUAKER'S WOOING"

"THE GRANITE CROSS," &c.

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**TO
HIM**

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE WOMAN FLINCHES
THE GRANITE CROSS
LETTERST O A PRISON
THE GREY TERRACE
THE GIFTED NAME
AS FLOWS THE RIVER
THE HORSESHOE
THE FORSYTHE WAY
LOVE'S MAGIC
THE IDYLL OF AN IDLER
THE LADY IN GREY
ST. DAVID OF THE DUST
THESE THREE
THE HOUSE OF REST
HAZEL OF HAZELDEAN
IN SILENCE
THE MAKING OF MICHAEL
A QUAKER WOOING
THE BOOK OF ANGELUS DRAYTON
THE MAN WITH THE WOODEN FACE
IN THE YEARS THAT CAME AFTER
AN IDYLL OF THE DAWN
A TANGLED GARDEN
LLANARTRO

AN ABSENT HERO

CHAPTER I

THE HERO IS CHOSEN

THE silver clock on the mantelpiece chimed the half-hour. Linda glanced up from the book she was reading ; Cecil had said she would be in by five, but half-an-hour, one way or the other, meant very little to Cecil. This room, with the silver clock, silken wall-draperies, heavily scented flowers and accumulated ornaments, was Cecil's, of course. No one would have needed more than the proverbial half-eye to be quite sure that it did not belong to Linda ; or, rather, that she did not belong to the room.

For one thing, the room made a point of its beauty, and Linda called herself plain, as a protest rather than an assertion. She certainly was not plain, though she had no special pretension to beauty. She spoke of herself as commonplace, unnoticeable ; she had, perhaps, no characteristic that called for immediate notice, yet, once noticed, she was not easily forgotten. This was partly due to her eyes. She herself bestowed on them the grudging admission that she ' supposed they served.'

Cecil told her once : " There are blue eyes in plenty, but not with immense velvety black pupils."

That was when Linda had been admiring Cecil's eyes, which were also blue but of the all-overish type. However, they also ' served.'

Cecil was really beautiful and Linda gave her the heart - whole transparent admiration a full-blown beauty always exacts from those still budding blossoms, her schoolfellows.

Cecil knew she was beautiful. The walls of this, her own particular room, confessed or betrayed it. There was Rubelow's Cecil in pastels, over the fireplace, head and neck and a wisp of airy drapery. Opposite the window was Mrs. Alec Firth's Cecil, in water-colour ; full length in a garden of roses. The real Cecil owned to a preference for artificial roses, for the practical reason that they did not fall to pieces ; but the painter had in some subtle way conveyed the idea of an intimate sympathy between the girl and the garden blossoms. It was a pretty idea, and a pretty picture.

There was a bust of Cecil on a grey marble pedestal. It was by le Saxe ; and so, as Cecil's father said, always worth while as an investment. It failed, though, as Cecil ; partly, no doubt, because hers was not the white marblé type of beauty. Perhaps le Saxe knew this, he had a reputation for malicious renderings. On the other hand, he refused as model any but the prettiest women. So Cecil allowed the bust a place in her room. Perhaps as a foil. There were people who said she had invited Linda Ray for the same purpose. That was not like Cecil at all ; she never thought things out,

at least hardly ever ; far more often she acted on impulse.

The room not only displayed painted and sculptured Cecils, there were photographed Cecils in plenty ; and although these, like the work of le Saxe, perforce lost her colour, they seemed to have caught something of her grace and vividness, a turn of the neck, a curve of the cheek, the vital spring of her hair. On the whole Cecil was carelessly content with her photographs, and gave them away with impulsive generosity ; it was Linda who considered none of them good enough.

The clock struck the quarter. Linda showed no impatience. Her book was the first by a new writer ; she found it interesting.

The clock struck again, six notes this time. Linda glanced up unseeingly whilst she turned the page to a new chapter.

In the end Cecil came with characteristic suddenness ; she might almost have flown to the door, for there was no warning sound till she opened it and in the same breath was looking down at Linda.

“ You dearest dear, have I kept you waiting—— Oh ! isn’t it hot—and not May yet ! ”

She began unloading herself of countless unnecessary but highly ornamental possessions : a bag, a feather ruffle, a chocolate box tied with ribbon, a tasselled purse, a handkerchief. As she tossed them from her, it seemed quite a matter of luck where they landed.

“ You look so cool, love,” her voice had a delicate shade of envy, “ like a hyacinth. They are always so fresh and chilly, I can’t stand them the first thing in the morning. You want the day aired for

hyacinths." She threw herself down in a chair. "It's deliciously cool in here. Don't let us go to Fratti's, let's have tea here instead, and be comfy."

"But you wanted so much to hear the Madrigal Maids."

"Did I? I don't now anyway, it's coolness I want, and quiet, and my own darling Linda to talk to."

She came and rubbed a velvety cheek, fragrant with violets, on one of Linda's. Linda closed her eyes, the bliss of the caress was like sunshine to her. She did not care a straw now for the Madrigal Maids nor for the special ices which she had looked forward to eating at Fratti's. It was more than enough to know Cecil needed her.

"Shall I ring for tea?" Her face was a-glow with happiness; it never looked at her so from her glass, but always seriously, questing for 'plainness.'

"Tea?" Cecil flung aside her gloves, missing with dainty exactness a slender-stemmed vase of lilies. "Tea? I have had some. Do you want any? If not, we need not bother. As a matter of fact, I want you all to mine self. I'm simply dying to tell you something."

Of course, Linda did not want tea—was it likely? She rose and sat down on the edge of the sofa in which Cecil had flung herself and whence she now slipped to the floor, kneeling in front of the hearth, where a fire drowsed and flickered, though outside Spring was already languorous with the birth-pangs of Summer.

"I do feel so stupid," Cecil said, touching the buckle of Linda's shoe with two slender white

fingers. It was a neat little shoe. The fact worried Cecil, when she thought of it, that though she was little taller, her feet were two sizes larger than Linda's. Wisely, she seldom thought of it; certainly not at this moment or she would not have fingered Linda's shoe-buckle. All the same she gave the foot a little push from her as she said again: "I do feel so stupid."

Then she laughed and the pink of her cheeks deepened.

"The fact is——" her eyes were on the rug now, she was tracing the faint pattern on it, carefully—"fact is, I've done a stupid thing, the stupidest of all things—I've been commonplace——" She laughed again, but uneasily.

The light began to dance in Linda's eyes.

"Is it so very commonplace to make someone supremely happy?"

Cecil laughed again, but with a sound softer and deeper.

"You goose, did I say I'd made anybody anything?"

"But I guessed."

Cecil lifted her chin, showing, unconsciously doubtless, the beautiful line of its contour.

"I'm vexed with myself, I am, really. I didn't mean—I had no sort of intention—I've always said I would not—at least not till I'm five-and-twenty—and particularly not him."

"There is a 'him,' then?"

Linda smiled down at her friend with another expression she had never seen in her looking-glass.

"Of course there's a 'him.' " Cecil dropped her

head sideways. "Did any woman ever do anything stupid without a man in it?"

The other bent nearer.

"Cecil"—there was awe in her voice—"you don't really mean you have promised?—that you are engaged, actually?"

"Is it so awful? because"—with a mocking inflexion—"that's just about it. I have promised." She paused, looked into the fire, then added: "There is something so horribly cut-and-dried in a promise. And I am—it does not seem real—but I suppose I am really engaged—though I can't, or I won't, believe it—— The silly part is—You are hurting my hand, Linda!—the silly part is, that at present—I've no doubt it is only temporary—I am almost absurdly happy——"

There was an interlude during which the girls hugged one another in orthodox fashion; with this difference, Cecil was aware of the orthodox, whilst Linda thrilled and glowed to the knowledge—she was not yet quite twenty—that the wonderful thing of romance—the rainbow foot that all girls in their dreams go in search of—had been reached, really reached by her friend, a girl not many years older than she, a girl she could gaze at, kiss and handle. Almost she heard the flutter of wings, the faint rattle of arrows loose in a quiver. One of these had sped home, at any near moment there might be the flight of another!

Cecil had shaken herself free of her friend; had risen to her feet; was aimlessly fingering her many possessions; flinging her arms about; babbling broken phrases excitedly.

Linda was almost more excited than Cecil, but

was of the type that is pale and still with excitement.

"Tell me," she said at last, "but not, unless you would rather——" she felt as one who turns and toys with a letter: possibilities are ended when the seal is broken, and, by a wanton freak in world-management, there is a bloom on 'what-may-be' never attained by 'what-is.'

"Tell me——" a sudden feeling of desecration stayed her. "No, no," she ended in haste, "don't tell me anything."

"But I want to, you silly. Some day you'll understand how I want to—no—I can't though—you must guess." Whereat Romance went quivering away like a broken rainbow, and Linda saw her feet set about with pitfalls. Only for three weeks had she basked in the light of Cecil's presence, yet in those three weeks moths innumerable had fluttered round that light. Cecil was of the royal kind that, giving recklessly, takes no count of the consequences.

A score of names rose to Linda's lips, caution withheld them. She answered with admirable lightness:

"Only idiots subscribe to the lottery of guessing where there's only one prize to be had in a hundred, and that not worth the having."

Cecil thrust out her lips. In anyone else—in herself a year or two later—it would have broken the charm, now it only drew Linda's heart nearer.

"You think I'm a flirt," Cecil said with a certain subdued pleasure.

"No, no," Linda protested, "but you can't help—you must have been born attractive——"

"I expect I was as hideous and uninviting as other infants——"

"But they aren't. Anyhow you couldn't have been——"

Cecil thrust her hand into Linda's affectionately.

"That bears out what I said—I've been stupid. Why does anyone want a man when girls are so very much nicer?"

At this Linda's eyes deepened till the blue flickered like a flame round its black centre, as she declared.

"I shall never want anyone but you."

"And I'd rather have you than anybody." Cecil lifted Linda's hand and bit it daintily and with restraint—as a cat does to show its affection.

"But, tell me, Cecil," there was awe in the voice of Linda, "do you mean to say you really have promised?"

Cecil dropped the other's hand.

"Yes, I have promised," for the moment languor had swamped her vivacity. "And, already, I am wondering why ever I did it."

To Linda the admission seemed horrible.

"But—Cecil—you said you were happy."

"Yes, only—happiness is so unsettling. This morning I was keen on a hundred things—the band at Fratti's, and clothes, theatres, those adorable heliotrope ices. And now I don't care for a single thing. I don't want to eat, or dress, I don't want to read or look at anything. Nothing seems of the slightest importance. Is this happiness?"

"I always thought that—that—*it*——"

"Why not name it, sillikins?"

A rare blush flooded Linda's face. "Love, then——" she said with an effort. It seemed unfair to the rainbow-winged child of her fancy to name him. "I always thought Love, like a burst of sunlight, would make everything more worth having."

"It doesn't then," Cecil retorted; "one more illusion shattered. Love's more like an arc lamp, you can't see anything else after you have looked at it."

"All the same, you are not sorry that—you looked?"

Cecil pulled at the neck of her frock.

"It's—it's so disturbing. It's so horribly revealing." She clutched at one of Linda's knees. "In a way it is horrid! I was always so sure of myself till now. And now—I don't feel certain. Supposing I'm not just what he thinks me! Of course I want him to think me perfection. I wouldn't have anything to do with him if he did not think me perfection. And then—supposing he finds out that I'm not——"

"Is he perfection, himself?"

For answer Cecil laughed out, happily.

"Do you want him to be perfection?" Linda continued.

"Rather not. Why, a perfect man! the thought's sickening. He'd be a sort of monster. At all events, inhuman!"

"And a perfect woman?"

"That's different. Men are such babes. They still insist on perfection for their one woman. So we have to play up to them, and if they find us out, they hate us."

"It doesn't seem very easy." Depression was beginning to follow Linda's first elation.

"Easy? what a child you are, Linda. Nothing's easy in life, and of all, Love's by far the most difficult."

There was silence for the moment. Then Linda asked—the glamour had so far departed that there seemed no sacrilege now in the question—

"You have not yet told me—have you?—who it is?"

"It? *Him*. You don't know him. He'll be only a name to you. It's rather odd, really. You see—I—I—didn't know at first. I thought it was just like the rest. He took it rather badly. I felt a bit down myself, and I couldn't understand it. I seemed to want somebody. That was when I wrote and got you to come. You've been such a brick to me. For the week or two between when he went and you came, I was horrid. I wonder people weren't fed up with me, altogether. He went straight away, you see; never wrote to me, even. They do generally. And I keep them for friends; so little makes the poor things quite happy. But he didn't. I don't know why I am telling you. At all events, to-day he's just gloriously happy. The funny thing was—I didn't even know I'd meet him. At the Lathams' it was. We walked back through the Park. The Spring flowers were wonderful."

She ended abruptly, rose to her feet, and began searching among her possessions.

"I have his photograph somewhere."

She opened an ornate Georgian casket, drew out a leather case and passed it to Linda. Linda took it with eager curiosity, though at the back of her

mind was a grudging feeling that the Unknown would not be worthy the prize he had won. You never could tell with Cecil, he might be quite old, or weird, or frankly impossible. In any case, she must not let Cecil suspect anything. She deliberately prepared herself for deception as she handled the case.

She opened it, and she sat for quite a long time in silence.

The photograph showed a young man who differed in no essential respect from the prevailing type of his fellows. Well-groomed, clean-shaven, the eye—his face was in profile—looked honest and purposeful. There seemed no need for the long pause, no need for the meditated deception.

"Well——?" Cecil said at last with impatience.

"He—he looks so serious."

"He isn't then." She peered over Linda's shoulder. "If no man's a hero to his valet, can any man be amiable towards his photographer?"

Linda gave Cecil's words but little attention. She still held the leather case, looking steadily down at it. All of a sudden she shut it. Cecil might have seen her face whiten had she thought to notice it.

"It hasn't quite caught his expression," Linda said steadily, "yet it is like him."

"Like him!" Cecil seized her friend by the shoulders, shaking her gently. "Like him! You don't mean to tell me that you know Rodney—Rodney Barrett!"

Linda nodded her head. If she was unsuitably silent and grave, Cecil did not notice it. For her part she was wildly excited.

"You dearest of dears! How perfectly splendid! Tell me what you think of him! Where did you meet him? A thousand things——!" She waltzed round the room.

"Splendid," she cried. Then again, "Splendid!—And I had a horrid idea, a little peeping mouse of an idea, that you might not like one another. Just because I so very much wanted you to, and that would have spoilt everything. And you do—you do! You can't deny it. Because otherwise you wouldn't have said that about his expression. It's only the people you like have expressions, isn't it?"

She rushed to Linda and kissed her, moving all the while as though full of tiny springs and mechanism.

"Tell me all about it—where did you meet? and what did you say? and everything? I shall die if you don't be quick and tell me."

She came to ground on the rug, flushed and exhilarated.

"Rodney will be glad. It is perfectly lovely, this," she ejaculated. "Now tell me all about it."

Linda's lips felt stiff, her hands cold and damp, tightly clasped together, yet she managed to answer bravely:

"There's not much to tell. We met down in Cornwall."

"But *when*?" Cecil half lifted herself in her excitement.

"About six weeks ago."

Cecil nodded her head at the fire. "It was Cornwall, then, he went to," she told it.

"He was staying—with—friends of ours." Linda's

voice was jerky, but Cecil was too much engaged with her own thoughts to notice it.

"And so you met," she prompted.

"As you are almost bound to do in the country."

"And you liked one another?"

Linda laughed. That laugh was a triumph.

"At all events we did not quarrel."

"I can't fancy Rodney quarrelling. Nor you either," she added generously. "And is that all?" She still looked at the fire, but gave a questioning backward jerk of the shoulders.

"Yes—that is all," answered Linda.

CHAPTER II

THE HERO IS DOUBTFUL

LINDA was alone in her room at last. It had seemed a long while before a decent opportunity of escape had offered itself. She felt desperately weary. Glancing at the bed she visualised herself lying face downwards, crumpling the pretty blue and white coverlet, clutching at the lace-edged pillows, giving way to a storm of tears. But she did not feel at all like crying, only very tired and a little sickly.

She went to a side-table where was a silk-bound writing-case, a presentation one she kept for visits. Everything in her room was delicately neat and orderly. Somewhere in a far corner of Linda's brain, an imp sat mocking. Why was she so neat and orderly? Would it not pay better—the impish dart pricked her—might it not pay better to be like Cecil—careless and unreliable?

Stifling the thought, she drew from the writing-case a slip-in photographic mount, and carried it to the window. She had no intention of sparing herself. Her face, as she looked down on the photograph, grew momentarily older, her eyes were sombre, though she slightly smiled. Her teeth were good and her slightly one-sided smile was pretty.

The face in the snapshot she was holding was the

same as that in Cecil's leather case. It was, however, not serious and in profile, but looking straight out and the eyes were laughing.

There was a rushing sound in Linda's ears, and before her eyes a dimness gathered everywhere except on the alert, rather boyish face in the photograph. Yet she stood a long time, not swaying at all, and her hands, holding the card-mount, were steady.

While she stared down at it, the faint smile still on her lips and her eyes sombre, she lived over again those few weeks when a bright butterfly thing had hovered about her heart, and she, longing to touch, had yet hardly dared look at it.

She remembered the first time she and Rodney had met. It was at the house of some friends; there was tea; several people a good deal older than Linda were talking—the room was stuffy, and she had divided her attention between prolonging the life of a morsel of cake indefinitely and endeavouring to keep her face on duty with polite attention. Then some young people had come in, just back from a cliff-scramble. Rodney Barrett was among them; she liked his rough clothes, the brown of his face and his hair breeze-ruffled.

They were introduced, shook hands, might have spoken, had someone not called out to Rodney. As he went, he just glanced at Linda, his grey eyes had a whimsical look—perhaps asking excuse, perhaps with a sort of understanding. She liked to think if he had not been called away just then they might have spoken together. Meanwhile, she was able to watch him. He seemed a general favourite; even the elderly ladies round the tea-

table had cast off their air of responsibility, and fluttered and giggled.

Recalling all this, a thought smote Linda suddenly. This must have been just after Cecil's first rejection of Rodney. He had gone down to Cornwall, one might suppose, in search of forgetfulness. And had seemed so heart-whole and happy !

Linda felt shaken. The world was not the simple place she had thought it, a place where you just lived, and met people, and where interesting little things happened. It seemed formless, embarrassed by drifting cobwebs ; not only might you be uncomfortably tangled in these, but also they hid you one from the other.

Once again she harked back to Cornwall. The time was early Spring, the season had been Summer. Day after day the heat haze shimmered over the yellow furze-bloom and the cliffs blue with ' Devil's flowers,' orange with lichen ; whilst down below the sea danced, sparkled, heaved green white-crested waves, broke into creamy foam with evanescent mauve shadows. Above it sea-birds glittered and whirled. There were boats rocking lightly, skimming over the water ; picnic fires in moist sandy places ; and cool-breathing caves where the water-light flickered on the wave-worn rock as you pushed the boat under it.

It was one of those special seasons that come now and then in the country, when people gather like migrant birds, chatter and feed, then scatter in all directions.

There were other people—Linda could recall names, even faces—but one stood out clearly with

no recalling, that of Rodney Baret. For her, he had lived whilst the rest only existed. Yet, standing with his photograph in her steady hands, Linda was strictly honest with herself.

He had not made love to her.

In the course of those few never-to-be-forgotten weeks, in some way for which Linda did not hold herself accountable, the two had drifted together. Perhaps, because there was a disposition towards pairs in the party. They had talked of many things; but of the One Thing, never.

Rodney—to use a mild but expressive Victorian phrase—had been *attentive*; he had carried her wraps; in an assured way had supplied her needs; had looked after her in a manner altogether delightful; yet—Linda gravely acknowledged the fact—some of the very things that had held so special a sweetness for her he had done with equal grace for others, for unattractive middle-aged women. It had increased rather than decreased his attraction for her.

And all that time his thoughts must have been with Cecil!

The hands that still held the photograph trembled a little; the misty grey of Life's cobwebs seemed closing down about Linda.

Yet during all that sun-filled Cornish existence, no one could have guessed Rodney's heart was elsewhere; he seemed so care-free, even merry; and though serious enough in their intimate talks, he never was sombre. He was full, too, of his work. He was an architect, just feeling his feet, brimful of enthusiasm for his calling.

Anyone would have thought him heart-whole and happy !

Yet all the while he must have been dreaming of Cecil !

Just three weeks Linda had known him—and then came the end. The last day was disappointing ; rain fell in the middle of a picnic. Huddled under towels and mackintoshes, people ate water-logged cake and affected enjoyment. Rodney was the only one who had not pretended. He had been—well, in anyone else Linda would have called it ‘glumpy.’

He and Linda had gone back in different boats. Linda had forced herself to believe this was sheer accident. *Now* she permitted herself to wonder.

For, all the time, there was Cecil !

The evening had been spent at the house of the people who had given the unfortunate picnic. The wet debarred the customary stroll in the garden which Linda had pictured, perhaps counted on. Some of the men had gone off to play billiards. Rodney had not wanted to play, Linda was quite sure he had not wanted to. But the rest had noisily insisted, and he had gone with them.

Linda's aunt had taken a chill at the wet picnic ; she kept on sneezing till people, perhaps in self-interest, suggested a return home, early bed, and sundry remedies. Aunt Emma demurred, though she kept on sneezing. Linda felt heartless ; but, with an anguished desire not to leave till she had at least bidden Rodney good-bye—he was leaving early next morning—had ignored sneezes and suggestions ; simulating extraordinary interest in the photographs someone quite negligible was

devotedly showing her. She held each one a long time and listened to her own voice talking, with, all the while, an ear for the click of balls and rumble of voices from the billiard-room.

Once she heard Rodney laughing. It was then despair seized her. He need not really have played had he not wanted to ; he could have refused, been rude, anything. The fact was he thought nothing of her, was even trying to avoid her.

She rose with sudden determination.

"May I see the rest some other time?" she asked of the negligible someone. "My aunt really must go to bed and be doctored."

Aunt Emma, grateful, but self-denying, had declared she was a horrid nuisance in any case, adding :

"But, Linda, there is no need for you to come with me. I'd much rather, dear, that you should finish your evening."

"I must—I had better——" Linda was aware her insistence was almost indecent—"you'll want someone to look after you."

"Gregson can do all I need." Aunt Emma flaunted her maid untactfully.

"I'd rather though," Linda turned from her round of 'good-byes' to say sweetly. Despite her depression, she could admire her own power of acting.

Aunt Emma had been quite deceived. Linda had felt a beast when, safely in bed and surrounded by comforts and remedies, flushed and bright-eyed, Aunt Emma had kissed and thanked her with affectionate effusion.

Aunt Emma was an old dear, but she hadn't the

slightest perception of things as they were. Who could though, through the drifting curtains of cobweb? Had Linda herself?

Even at the bitter last she had told herself doggedly that only she was to blame, she had had no real reason to think that Rodney—had—*cared*. She was urgent to put herself in the wrong; at all costs, he must be in the right. Not a single hint had come to her that, all the while, there was someone else, someone so immeasurably superior, in every way more desirable, as her own dearest friend, Cecil.

She put away the photograph, and began to dress for the evening. The eyes that looked back from the glass were expressionless and stony. She thrust out her lower jaw a little and went on with her dressing. People must be clothed, she supposed, though it seemed silly to bother about anything except just being decent. She even smiled, wanly, as she thought of the pleasure this particular frock had given her when she tried it on before coming to London; whilst Aunt Emma looked on with kind-eyed approval; Gregson adding her flattering comments to the plainly expressed admiration of Lumley, the housemaid, who had made some excuse to slip into Aunt Emma's room, where had been 'called' the full-dress rehearsal.

'Fine feathers make fine birds,' Linda had tried to say cynically. And all the while—she was sick now to recall it—the thought had played backwards and forwards—'I may meet Rodney Barrett in London!' And it had come to this, the thing she cried out, prayed against, was just that meeting, though she knew for a dread absolute

certainly that, sooner or later, the thing was inevitable.

For a moment she weakened to a sense of self-pity. She was so young—not yet quite twenty—to have finished already with happiness.

She had ended her toilet by now, and once again she gazed in the mirror, drawing attenuated comfort from the thought that Rodney Barrett would hardly know she was there in the presence of Cecil. She looked long and steadily. The dress was still pretty that had once set her heart a-flutter. She fastened a bracelet—she knew her arms were presentable. If only there had not been Cecil. He and she might have met again, sometime—much plainer people had been known to be happy—he might have—*cared* some time.

Having turned off the light conscientiously, she went downstairs to smile at the Wolneys' guests, to chatter a little and simulate interest. She had once overheard herself called a good listener.

CHAPTER III

THE HERO IS MYSTERIOUS

AUNT EMMA missed her dear niece, so she said in her letter. Linda wondered whether it might not be her duty to go back to Cornwall. Of course it would be hard to give up her delightful stay with Cecil ; this had not been called a visit, but was of indefinite termination. But then, if Aunt Emma really missed her—— Aunt Emma had always been so kind—Linda had never realised how kind till this moment. It seemed rather unkind to desert the old dear just now, when she ought to be useful. London, of course, was alluring ; and the country would be doubly dull after it. But if Aunt Emma really did need her——

The prospect tempted.

For, all the while, like the stab of a mechanical needle, through Linda's brain shot an endless reiteration, urging her—'Get away ; you must get away, before you have met him !'

You see, it was all over. Everything was over and done with. Cecil did not need her now, really. And if she could make Aunt Emma happy, that would be something—when you are not twenty yet and very unhappy, you must have something to cling to. You cannot all at once accept the fact that you are not of the slightest importance, and that

the world—your world—anyone's world—has no use at all for you.

To bolster up some sort of credit in her proposed escape, Linda tried hard to make herself believe that she really did want to stay on in London. For might there not be a sort of perilous pleasure in meeting Rodney——? Was it caution then, or cowardice, that stabbed on in her brain, with its—*'Get away, get away quickly——'*?

"I'll do it," she said aloud to her reflection. She had not finished her hair, she was swathing it round her head for the morning. It was dark brown, thick and fine—not fair and fluffy like Cecil's. More than anything, she had always envied Cecil her hair, which had never looked dowdy like that of the other girls; though more than once Cecil had been in 'hot water' for its untidiness. But Cecil lived in 'hot water' in those days, and seemed to thrive on it.

Linda, for her part, by dint of strenuous exertion and much self-repression, had always carried off 'good conduct' reports. Often since, she had been tempted to wonder—was there sufficient game for the candle?

When she had finished her hair with its usual neatness, she had decided:

"I will go; Aunt Emma needs me."

Her face looked white in the glass. She never had a brilliant colour like Cecil's but, as a rule, a healthy pinkness. She was pleased by her pallor; being young enough to expect, to approve of signs of suffering. It was right that she should look pale, but her eyes were so dark that she turned away disconcerted. They seemed looking right

into the soul of her ; and before them her soul shivered.

It was just then that Cecil burst into the room ; she had a way of entering suddenly yet without any crudeness, in the same way as an evening primrose bursts its bud sheath in silent suddenness. She plumped herself down on the bed ; radiant she was and smiling ; her heel-less shoes hung by the toes showing the heliotrope soles of her black stockings.

"Up before you this morning," she cried in triumph, "and you were in bed long hours before I was."

"Did you enjoy the dance ? "

"It was a frost. It was just as well in the end that we applied too late to get you a ticket."

"But why a frost ? "

"Don't know. Why are some things ripping and others deadly ? Must be the people."

"Weren't the right people there ? Was not——" Linda turned—with a pretence of tidying her toilet table—carefully, for Cecil must not see the reflection of her face in the glass as she schooled her lips to ask the question :

"Was not Mr. Barett there ? "

Glancing at the curve of her friend's back, Cecil laughed softly, yet was aware of a slight feeling of discomfort as she answered :

"*He* was there—came late—said he'd been busy, or something." With a pointed finger-tip she was tracing the outline of an over-blown blue rose on the coverlet.

With a supreme effort Linda slammed a door on Self ; for the moment life shone fair and beckoned

her, a life lived entirely for others. She turned a bright face to Cecil.

"The dance was all right afterwards?" she suggested.

"Yes. We didn't dance much though. He'd hurt his knee, or something——"

"His knee?—Cecil!—Not anything serious?"

"Of course not, or he couldn't have danced at all, could he?" Cecil was at times strictly practical. "I don't think," she continued, "it was his knee, it might have been his ankle. There was a roseroy sort of a place, and we sat there a bit. It was draughty, though, and there seemed to be nowhere——"

"The arrangements evidently were not of the best——" It was quite easy, Linda thought with elation, to forget yourself in the interests of others. She really *was* interested. "Were there no little cosy corners?" she asked.

"Heaps—simply heaps! But every single one occupied. People are abominably selfish in those ways."

There was nothing forced about the laugh with which Linda prefaced:

"Supposing you had been in occupation?"

"We weren't, though; and anyway, we are engaged, and that makes it quite different."

"Of course." Again Linda turned away. It was not going to be altogether easy. '*We are engaged!*' The glorious confidence of the words! And—supposing there had not been Cecil!

"We found a place at last," Cecil went on, "that wasn't half bad, if it had not been for the noise and smell of refreshments, and the coming

and going of waiters. Though you don't mind waiters—I mean not like you do people.”

“Aren't waiters people?” Linda managed a laugh.

“I knew you'd say that. You know what I mean, though. It is only quite a few people that are people really.”

“The rest are shadows.”

“What odd things you say, Linda.”

“I dare say it's the same with them. To them *we* are shadows.”

Cecil laughed.

“I don't care what I am to them so long as they don't bother me.”

Linda stood up very straight, staring down at her hands clasped in front of her.

“It's rather dreadful,” she said, “all the people—with all their thoughts going on continually. A never-ending humming of thought.”

“Luckily the thoughts don't really hum.”

“Mine do,” said Linda. “Sometimes I can hardly hear anything else for them—nor see anything but their flutter——”

“You odd little ‘lunie’; Rodney's more than half right about you.”

“Rodney? Mr. Barrett?—about me?” Linda's heart was beating to suffocation.

“Of course. You were one of the things we talked about. Didn't your ears burn whilst you were sleeping?”

“What—what did he say?”

“I was saying how jolly it was that you, my particular friend, had met him, and all that sort of thing; and I pretended to tease him about his goings

on down in Cornwall, saying he'd soon consoled himself and so on. I'm not at all sure that he liked it.—Say, Linda, you might tell me—did you two have a weenie-teenie flirtation ? ”

“ Of course not.” Linda's eyes flashed, her cheeks were burning.

“ There's no ‘ of course ’ in the matter. Rodney's just the serious-seeming sort that is easily captured. And you know, Linda, or, if you don't, you'll not be long in finding it out, you are oddly fascinating. That, by the way, is not mine, it's Rodney's.”

“ He said I was—that——” Turning away, Linda pulled open a drawer ; her fingers fluttered undecidedly over the contents.

“ We had been talking about you ; I was telling him what friends we are and I think we said something about opposites attracting one another. I don't know quite how he took it. Men have such odd ideas ; they firmly believe we are all jealous of one another. Such rot ! I know I like girls a lot better than men. Except, of course, Rodney—and he's different. It was so like him—his straight sort of way—you feel like coming up against a rock. He looked straight ahead—you know what glorious eyes he has—his words struck me, that is why I remember them—he said :

“ ‘ She is oddly fascinating.’ ”

‘ *Oddly fascinating !* ’ Linda was not at all sure that she liked it ; though of course it did not matter in the least what Rodney Barrett thought of her. ‘ Fascinating,’ though ! It did not seem likely, yet her heart fluttered. But ‘ oddly ’—why ‘ oddly ’ ? She felt hurt at the ‘ oddly.’ Not that it mattered ; and anyhow there would be time later, plenty of

time, to think it all over. For the present she must carry things on, make an immediate answer. Yet there was an appreciable pause before Linda managed a laugh, prefacing :

" I am sure I am flattered. Did he really mean me, though ? "

" Of course he did. In fact, if you want it, what he really said was ' Linda Ray is oddly fascinating. ' "

" Everybody called each other by their Christian names," Linda put in hurriedly, adding an explanatory, " You do in the country."

It was a funny thing, but she felt her eyes sparkle just because he had spoken her name.

Cecil went on without giving a thought to Linda's explanation.

" He might have meant only the name, though. Linda Ray is undoubtedly pretty—sounds, of course, a bit actressy, but Linda is a lot prettier than Cecil, as I told him."

" He would not allow it ? "

It was only the name then ! Anyone might say a name was ' oddly fascinating. ' She could picture Rodney as he would say it with his eyes glinting under their dark lashes and a half-smile at his mouth corner. Rodney was always so merry, not noisily, fatiguingly merry, but it was always there, bubbling out of sheer kindly happiness. All the Cornish time he must have been really sure of Cecil or he never could have been so happy. Whilst his attention to Linda—to everyone—must have been the outcome of his love for Cecil ; for her sake all women were precious. It was like a bit out of a book—really, it was wonderful !

" He didn't allow it, of course." Cecil slipped off

the bed and came and stood by the dressing-table, raised a hand to her hair, said 'May I?' picked up an invisible pin and fastened an outstanding hair spiral more becomingly, before she said: "Let's see—what was I saying?"

"Speaking heresy—stating Linda is prettier than Cecil."

"Only the name."

"I wasn't fishing."

"Of course not; and comparisons are odious, anyway."

Cecil kissed her. "I'd give a good deal for your eyebrows, at all events."

"Are they nice? What bids? A pair of eyebrows said to be enviable, but of little use to the owner."

Cecil stared in the glass at her own reflection, with that of Linda a little behind it. Her own features and colour could stand close observation and had nothing to fear from comparison.

"I wonder," she said, "was it your eyebrows? Your eyes are not so blue as mine, are they? I am not at all sure that I like it."

"Like what?" Linda was looking at her own reflection, and, as usual, without any comfort. There was nothing to take violent exception to, certainly, in the thin dark line of brow, but the eyes underneath were more black than blue; as for the rest of the face, it was insignificant both in line and colour.

"What don't you like, Cecil?"

"Him to call you 'fascinating.'" Cecil was turning her head a little this way and that; in common parlance 'making eyes' at her own reflection.

'*Oddly* fascinating!' Linda repeated the phrase mentally. She could not get over the '*oddly*.' It seemed to imply that she had no right to be '*fascinating*.'

"I am not sure," Cecil went on meditatively, "whether I would not rather like to be thought '*oddly* fascinating.' There is something in it that piques. And a man ought to find a woman puzzling."

"Does it matter—does anything matter, so long as he loves her?"

"You baby," Cecil retorted; "as though love were an end. It is only a beginning."

Linda turned away and went and looked out of the window. She did not see, however, the towering white-bricked wall of the neighbouring flats; but, instead, a wide splash of blue, half sea and half sky, and a man's face sunburnt and vivid against it.

"Cecil," she said earnestly, "do you suppose, having won *you*, a man would have eyes for any other woman? Rodney Barrett is not that sort of man at any rate."

Cecil came up behind and kissed the back of her neck affectionately.

"You are a dear little thing," she said warmly, adding, "I suppose one of the things Love does is to make you think less of yourself." She began to play with the window-curtain, pleating the edge, shaking it gently, then she went on:

"There's nothing wonderful about Rodney, really. Yet, somehow, I feel he ought to have the best of everything; something about him seems to lay claim to it. Have you ever felt like that with any-one, Linda?"

"No—I—I don't think I have," she faltered.

"I suppose not—but there's plenty of time," Cecil said absently. Then tossing the curtain from her, she kissed Linda again.

"He is coming here, this evening," she told her.

CHAPTER IV

NEW LIGHT ON THE HERO

THE hour was past midnight, yet Linda was still wide-eyed on her bed. She had not turned out the light, she could not face darkness. To some griefs darkness comes kindly, spreading wide wings of shelter, removing the need of the mask of pretence, in itself guarding against discovery. But there are sorrows to which it is horrible—stripping the soul, the cowering soul that would fain cling to its pretences.

For her part, Linda left the light burning whilst she tried to face her trouble. For a long while she was still and rigid, hands clutched, eyes sombrely staring. Then she gave a little low laugh that startled her so that she looked round her fearfully. Someone might have heard her laughing !

Outside was heavy silence, broken only by the tingling bell and *clop, clop* of a belated hansom.

It was the thought of that last night at Pendrael that had set Linda laughing. *Then* she had thought herself unhappy because things had been disappointing, because Rodney had seemed to avoid her, most of all because he was going away. She had cried *then*. She recalled a bitter pleasure as she had turned over her wet pillow. *That* had not been *real* sorrow !

With a sudden odd stab at the heart, she wondered: Did she know it now? Or might there be other depths, still blacker than the present, waiting for her in the future? She turned wild, haunted eyes round the luxurious bedroom. Then a measure of healing came to her; surely now she had reached the bottom; surely now she knew the limit of agony. She would carry a numb heart through life, always; but numbness was better than torture.

Somewhere, with a hushed voice, a clock struck three chimes melodiously.

Three o'clock! Never, not even that night at Pendrael, had she been so wakeful. And sleep seemed as far off as ever! If only she could have had someone to confide in! She pictured enfolding arms, a warm encompassing presence. Her mother had died so long ago that she was beyond reach of memory, she was not even a face or a voice; yet Linda cried out—twisting her hands, burying her face in the pillow—"Mother! oh, Mother!"

She waited some moments whilst the heavy silence pressed her despairing cry back on her. Then came an inspiration—almost, as it seemed, an answer. She rose up in bed, flushed and disordered; yet stopping automatically for dressing-gown and slippers before she went across to the writing-table. From the wide-open window the night air struck chilly. She shivered, and took a queer pleasure in the fact that she shivered. Hurriedly she found pen, ink and paper. She knew her mother was by many long silent years beyond reach of a letter, yet she was going to write to her mother.

She began abruptly :—

He came here this evening. I tried to forget that he had called me ‘oddly fascinating’ and yet, all the while, I remembered it. Now, I know what he meant by ‘fascinating,’ still more by ‘oddly’; but I did not then. That is to come later.

I think I wanted to see him. In spite of all that had happened I still wanted to see him. I think you will understand how, in spite of all, I wanted it.

I dressed carefully. I had thought I should never take any more interest in dressing. I shan’t now; I still did, then. I chose my prettiest dress, and I did my hair the way he told me he liked when we strolled in the Raynors’ garden by moonlight. I suppose it was silly, wrong even; I have no one, you see, to advise me; there is Cecil, of course; but she would not understand very well; besides, there are reasons why she would be the last person——

I was in the drawing-room with Cecil’s father and mother. She is like Cecil, but faded, only I don’t think she knows it, and it’s rather pathetic; like a pressed flower and a live one together. Cecil’s father was very young, as he always is, in spite of his waist line, and was joking as usual. He pinched my cheek and said :

“Now if all this charming get-up isn’t for me—and I hardly dare hope it—who is it for? I shall look out when they arrive, and your cheeks will give me my answer.”

They did not. At least, he would not notice

that I went a bit whiter when Rodney and Cecil came in together. He did not see me at first, at least he did not seem to—but he coloured. That hurt me. *He* had nothing to be ashamed of. It was not his fault that I——

Mother, mother, why did you not stay with me ?

Cecil brought him up to me ; she was hanging on his arm, as I have seen her often with other men, in her own gay fashion that means nothing. He was graver, quieter than I remembered him. I suppose great happiness does subdue some people. He only gave a forced sort of smile when Cecil said :

“ Here, you two people, I know you are dying to exchange Cornish Don’t-you-remembers, so I’ll make myself scarce. Now, Linda, I can trust you not to flirt desperately. Of course I can’t trust Rodney——”

She threw him a glance. I wonder why it was I ever thought her eyes unexpressive.

The room, by then, was half full of people. Rodney sat down by me on the sofa. And we talked commonplaces. I was tingling to the fact that he had called me ‘oddly fascinating.’ His mind, I’ve no doubt, was centred on Cecil, he was vexed that she had left him. He did not want to talk to me. Yet we both bowed to the conventions with commonplace. We did not talk Cornwall.

He did not. And I could not. It was something to me—Mother, your daughter has no pride left in her——

It was something to me, still something, just

to sit beside him ; to see his face, that I had not forgotten ; to catch the tones of his voice, that I had so well remembered. But he never smiled once. And that hurt me.

I smiled—or laughed, at any rate. It is easier to laugh than to smile, isn't it, when your heart is breaking ? Also it is easier for women to act than to be natural. Never had I found words come more easily, and the little quaint twists of them that I happen on sometimes—

I used to see in his eyes that they amused him.

To-night they came tripping out, just as many as ever I wanted. Cecil's father, who was on the other side, overheard what we were saying, turned round, joined in and kept crying, ' Bravo ! that got home,' and things like that. Then one or two others came. Once I should have delighted in being the centre. Of course I pretended, and kept it up, taking all the openings they gave me. I won't say there was no bravado in it, I expect I wanted to show him—— He was unusually quiet and occasionally I thought he looked puzzled.

He was glad, I think, when some late arrivals broke up our circle and dinner was announced.

He never came near me all the rest of the evening. Of course it was natural he should be absorbed by Cecil ; yet I saw him talking and laughing with other people. Cecil told me beforehand that they had agreed there should be no ' rubbish ' between them.

For my part, I kept it up bravely. I never knew, though, it could be so tiring.

He did not look at me when he said ' Good-night ! '

But, Mother, this is the worst. When at last all was over—you can't think how haggard I looked in my glass. Your child has grown old very quickly! I was just unloosing my hair—I shan't do it just that way again, ever—when Cecil ran in and came swooping down on me. I was sick with fatigue, but I hope I didn't show it too plainly. She lifted up some of my hair and kissed it—Cecil can do things like that without seeming silly—and she said: “Enchanted tresses! I must kiss away the enchantment.”

And I said: “I don't really know what you mean.” Though I did, just a little.

And she went on:

“You know, Linda, you are more than a bit in love with him; but I am not going to have it.”

I pretended to think she was playing, and with all the innocence I could muster, I answered:

“Is it part of the disease?”

“Which and what?” She laughed in a rather shy way, which showed she knew what I meant. I did wish she would not hold my face in her hands, forcing me to look up in her eyes, so that it took all my powers of acting to answer steadily:

“To think all other women want the man you have chosen.”

At that she let my face go, and began to play with things on my dressing-table, as she said, in a low voice:

“Not *all* other women.”

“Cecil, *you* have no need to be jealous.” I said it as lightly as I could, and I meant it, too, and so I could kiss her.

She returned the embrace affectionately.

"You darling," she said, "I don't mind telling you what I wouldn't breathe to another soul: that, from the first, I meant to have Rodney. Of course, he's not rich nor particularly handsome, nor clever or anything—but he's just himself, and I wanted him. When he asked me first, I didn't feel sure enough of him, and I knew if I said 'No,' then, he'd come back again. So I sent him away. You see how that was, don't you?"

I did see. She had been playing cat and mouse with Rodney—though, perhaps that is an ill-natured way of putting it,—and all along she was sure of her power.

Almost I hated Cecil; and all the time her arm was round me, and the soft touch of her curly hair on my neck. I hated her, yet I loved her. For, in spite of everything, I believe she really cares for Rodney. She is much worthier him than I am. I was fighting—fighting all the time to make myself know it.

Then came the final blow. Resting her head against mine, looking with approving eyes at the reflection of her rose-like face against my pale one, she cooed into my ear:

"You are very young, dearest. I feel twice your age sometimes. May I give you a teeny-tiny bit of advice?"

Of course I said 'Yes'; though the whole of me was crying out 'No.' A cut in the dark is so often given under the name of advice, by women.

"A woman who throws herself at a man is a fool," she said softly.

Once I tried to speak and failed. The second time my voice came, I do think, unconcernedly.

"What makes you say that to me, Cecil?"

"In case it might, some time, be useful."

With that she drew back, murmured something about keeping me from my bed, kissed me 'good-night,' and went away humming.

What did she mean?

What does she think?

I didn't—I'm certain I never did that with Rodney. We were just friendly. I see now, of course, we were only just friendly. And even *that* he started.

What did she mean? A warning? Can Rodney have said anything? No, no, he would not. I shall die if I think him less worthy. Yet 'oddly fascinating.' And to-night—that new look in his eyes. Was it pity I saw there? A man—he might look so at the woman for whose love he had no answer.

Does he pity me, then? If so, mother, I have reached the veriest bottom. And the days and the years before me are endless. Do people live to be old when they are terribly unhappy?

Of course, I have Aunt Emma. I must go back and be very good to Aunt Emma. Did she ever suffer like this poor thing? Perhaps she did, and you knew it. If she did, she'll find out about me. I don't think I dare face Aunt Emma.

Mother, what can I do?

Linda stared down at the last written words, sombrely. Yet, though she did not know it, already her burden was lightened.

Outside the rain fell softly, the water-pipes gurgled, the air came in, moist, with a faint sugges-

tion of the mile-long rain-clouds that drift over the cliffs of the Cornish homeland. A clock struck four muffled strokes melodiously.

Linda shivered, yawned, blotted and folded her letter. She slept with it clutched in her hand under the pillow.

CHAPTER V

THE HERO'S RELATIONS

CECIL sat down and looked at Linda rather helplessly, as she stated :

" A most terrible thing has befallen me. I know I have no right to make moan. It is the natural consequence of my own folly."

" What folly ? "

" Engaging myself to a man with a family.—I have got to go and see Rodney's people. Honestly, I never suspected he had any."

" But he has," Linda returned, " and he's awfully fond of them. He thinks all the world of his father."

" He told me he's a rough diamond." Cecil's attitude was despairing.

The colour rushed to Linda's cheeks, the war-light to her eyes.

Cecil made a restraining gesture.

" I know what you are going to say. Mother has said it already. For *his* sake his people ought to be dear to me ! Father was much more refreshing. He said, ' Do the polite, and thank Heaven you've not got to live with the lot of them.'—Then there's his sister. Do you know about the sister ? "

" I'm rather afraid—did he tell you—— ? Of course we've all a right to our opinions——"

"My dear child, don't go on scraping your feet on the door-mat. The sister's a Suffragette. I only knew it last night!"

"Not militant, though——" Linda held out the scanty comfort.

"I'm not so sure." Cecil looked gloomy. "Rodney seemed more troubled than he need have been over a non-militant. Personally, of course, I don't see why we shouldn't have votes, and I expect the men would give them to us if we asked nicely instead of breaking windows."

"I don't really understand much about politics," Linda said frankly—"but those women—any of their speeches I have read—they seem so illogical."

"I could forgive that. For women to be logical is rather 'stuffy.' But, my dear, they do dress so badly. Such awful hats! And some of them wear an obsolete thing called a 'jacket.'"

Linda laughed.

"As represented by *Punch* and the pantomimes?"

"I've seen them in the flesh, worse luck."

"The jackets?"

"The creatures themselves. I saw them outside Westminster. They were hot and perspiry, and their boots, and their gloves, and their voices! They quite put me off having the vote if that's what it makes you."

"They haven't got it, though."

"They want it—that's the same thing, isn't it?"

"I don't think they would agree to that."

"It's the same thing to me, anyhow. I know I am illogical. As for you, I believe you are half a Suffragette at all events."

"Not I—I own I can't see anything unfeminine

in the action of voting. If women can pay taxes and carry on businesses, why shouldn't they——"

"You shan't! I won't be converted——"

Cecil put her hands to her ears.

Linda pulled them away.

"Don't be afraid, I have been *unconverted*—or *dis-*, is it?—by the rough, rude ways of the rowdy element."

"There you are——" Cecil selected a rose from a bowl and smelt at it daintily. "Isn't it horrid to think of Rodney with a rough, rowdy sister? I know I shall be rude to her, and he'll be disgusted——" Her eyes filled pathetically. "Why ever," she broke out, "were people made up into families, like the lots they offer at sales—a sword, an earthenware pot, a piece of worn table-linen—and—what shall we say for the sister?"

"Supposing we wait till we see her."

"I know she's going to be awful—a great brass knob of a door handle!"

"Worse: a white china one with a gold line on it."

"Something aggressively vulgar, anyhow. And there are people who actually like sale lots. They seem to find them exciting."

"They can always throw them away after."

Cecil shook her head dolefully.

"Unfortunately, you can't throw away your relations-in-law."

She replaced the rose, pushing it far down amongst the others. It was Linda who had filled the bowl, and it troubled her to see the one-sided effect Cecil's touch had given to her arrangement. She did not like to rectify it. Cecil, in small ways,

was thin-skinned, she liked to think she could do everything a little better than anyone else, that her finishing touch improved things. So Linda left the self-conscious rose with its green leaves sticking up round it; and, forcing herself to look elsewhere, she went on:

"Isn't it to-day Mr. Barrett is taking you to see them?—I mean, his people."

"Mr. Barrett! How stiff we are, all of a sudden! Why not Rodney? I don't mind. And I know you think of him as Rodney."

Thoughts flashed through Linda's brain. She knew she ought to have had ready a neat retort, but she failed to find one. She whitened a little as she said calmly:

"Is he taking you to-day, then?"

"That's just it. Didn't I tell you? That's all the trouble. We had settled to go to-day—it was quite bad enough, then. I tried all I could to put it off—but Rodney is so pig-headed, he won't give in. I've found that out. And at first I thought him so amiable, that I could twist him twice round my finger. I've always had my own way, and I don't half like it——" she broke off with a sunny smile—"I do like it, really. I think I can understand women loving a man who beats them."

"I can't. It would lower him in my eyes. A really strong man can control himself."

Cecil pursed up her mouth.

"I don't think I like 'controlled' men any better than logical women.—How you keep on interrupting!—To try back—it was Rodney who chose to-day; he would have to-day. And now, after all, he's not coming."

"You've got your way in the end, then?"

"Not a bit of it. I've just got to go without him."

To this appalling statement silence seemed the only appropriate answer.

Cecil appreciated Linda's attitude, for she went on:

"You are just about right. Isn't it awful?"

"It is too bad"—Linda brought out with an effort—"too bad of—Rodney."

"It isn't *his* fault," Cecil returned irritably, "it's the Office that's keeping him. Some silly Lord, or important personage. Rodney has done the plans for his house or something. He rang me up on the telephone. I said, 'All right; another day, then.' I was so glad to put it off, I felt like singing into the receiver. Then his voice was saying, 'My luck again, and I wanted so much to go with you.' 'Whatever are you driving at?' I shouted back—I always fancy a telephone's deaf, somehow. And I told him I was jolly well not going without him.

"But you must, you see."

"I don't see, and I don't even hear very well; because the wire is humming."

"You will go though?"

"Even over the 'phone his voice sounded coaxy."

"I can't; I simply can't go alone."

"Won't your mother go with you?"

"As luck will have it, she's indulging herself in bed with a headache."

"I thought I'd settled him then; for there was a lapse, whilst I overheard someone else making what sounded like an interesting appointment."

“ ‘Are you there?’ Rodney had returned to the charge. ‘You see, mother will have made preparations.’

“Preparations for me! I felt like breaking it off with him, then and there, over the ‘phone. The sort of people, you know, that make preparations!

“It’s all right for you, Linda, but I’ve got to belong to them!

“He went on with a lot like that, and about its being important not to offend his father. The old man’s rich, you know, still I never thought Rodney was one to play up for money——”

“It may not be money,” Linda suggested. “If he is fond of his father, he naturally wants him to like you.”

“The father is pretty sure to like me,” Cecil said carelessly. “I’m much more bothered about the mother, who has made ‘preparations’! And the Suffragette sister—she came into it, too. It seems she is staying at home on purpose. I don’t know what she does generally. I expect something awful! As I said, I felt horribly like yelling: ‘I won’t go, and this is an end between us.’ I believe I should have, only you can’t throw a ring back over the telephone.

“I am sure, if anyone had heard us, they would have thought we really were quarrelling. The end of it was, as he made such a point of it, I said I would go, and take you with me.

“Rodney suggested your going, and I grabbed at the notion. I shan’t feel half so bad with you to back me; besides, you always see the funny side of things and we can have a good laugh afterwards. They can’t all talk to me at once, anyway.”

"Suppose"—Linda's eyes were dancing—"they are all heavily silent?"

"Do you think they will be?" Cecil looked startled. "I never thought of that possibility. I imagined them all firing off questions. Isn't that what people do when they 'draw' a new relation? At the best I shall have a sense of 'Sale or Return,' I know they'll be on the *qui vive* to find out whether I'm not a little bit shop-soiled. It's a blessing to know, at any rate, that you are coming. You'll stand by me, won't you?"

"Of course I'll stand by you."

Oddly enough, Linda's depression had lifted. She acknowledged to herself a faint sense of pleasure in the thought of meeting Rodney's people. The fact that they were his, drew her. She knew the father was a self-made man, and the mother had once been a governess. Rodney had not said much about his sister; Linda had an ill-defined feeling that he admired or was afraid of her. Perhaps a little of both.

As she was choosing a hat for the occasion, she surprised herself humming. She stopped, almost guiltily.

Did it matter which hat she wore? It was Cecil who must look her best. But that she did always.

Nevertheless, Linda put aside two hats and selected a third as the most becoming.

CHAPTER VI

THE HOUSE OF THE HERO

THE Baretts' house was frankly Victorian ; ugly beyond words, it only escaped vulgarity by the fact that it was sincere. It emphasised Mrs. Barrett's placid delight when a meagre ' semi-detached ' was exchanged for its solid comforts ; it told of Mr. Barrett's satisfaction when some fifteen years earlier he had insisted that everything should be good and—what, it has to be owned, he called—*genu-ine*. Genuine, certainly the house was, genuine as home-made pastry, and as solid.

Cecil and Linda were impressed.

It was a fresh spring day and, in spite of the weight on their spirits, the girls had enjoyed their taxi-ride, which had brought the colour into Linda's cheeks ; her eyes sparkled too. A heavier trouble than hers must yield to the call of sheets of blossom, yellow, red, purple, white and rose, that rollicked through the staid London parks.

But directly the door was opened the Victorian House laid a subduing hand upon them, with something of the formal touch of a school-parlour, that tells of the Eye of Inquisition beyond.

The hall received them coldly, conscious, though not ashamed, of the imitation marble of its walls. A man-servant, with all the importance of a Suffragan

Bishop, preceded them up the wide shallow stairway. The girls glanced at one another apprehensively ; Cecil furtively pinched Linda's arm.

The stairs were thickly carpeted, the fat sausage of a baluster-rail as thickly varnished. Cecil laid a hand on it timidly, but Linda shook her head.

"The Bishop would spot a mark in a moment," she whispered.

A dark mahogany door, that had also too evidently been glutted with varnish, swang open without a sound ; the tail of a heavy plush portière dragged noiselessly away behind it. Without any further preparation, the room presented itself solemnly.

Blue rep curtains, two 'arms,' six chairs, and one sofa 'ditto' ; six 'occasional' chairs ; a shining oval table ; a marble and gilt clock, the flight of time solemnly punctuated by a hydrocephalous cupid on a swing ; two gilt gentlemen on bronze horses ; water-colours, with wide white margins and gilt frames that seemed to leap from the walls—the whole thing rushed at them all at once, without any modesty of decent self-repression ; and this, though the whole room was the incarnation of honest 'pride.'

At either end of the blue rep sofa was a hard round bolster ; from the axle of each dangled a tassel of yellow silk.

Cecil suppressed an inclination to giggle ; Linda felt a mad desire to rush round opening windows. The room was so oppressively middle-aged, so tightly corseted that it lacked breathing-room. There was no sign of human presence and they came to the conclusion that the Suffragan Bishop, hollow-voiced, was announcing them to the room

itself. It seemed quite fit that he should do so. But from the nearer of the two big arm-chairs, which sported 'chairbacks' illustrating nursery rhymes in coloured wool on an oatmeal ground, came a chirrupy cough, followed by the jingling of charm-hung bracelets; and a very small lady, who had till now been hidden by the high chair back, advanced to meet her visitors. She kissed them both—Cecil first—holding her hands and looking at her with a sort of pathetic appeal, Linda thought. Mrs. Barrett's eyes were pale and looked short-sighted, but she wore no glasses.

"Come to the fire," she bade them, fluttering nervously, glancing up at them—she was very tiny—in her startled, short-sighted way. "Come to the fire."

She gave an inviting pull first to one and then to the other of the dignified chairs; then perched herself on an 'occasional,' twisting her feet round its legs, as a child might have done.

"Do come nearer the fire," she gasped out, hospitably.

An enormous fire burnt in the grate, reflecting itself with terrible brilliance in the bright steel fender, which was adorned at either end with the fore-part of a dog emerging from scroll-like ornaments, and in the middle with a stag's head and arching antlers. Cecil was wondering who had conceived, who had carried out this monstrosity; Linda pondered the subject of servants. Did Mrs. Barrett keep a special one to polish this fender?

So far the conversation had not advanced beyond the primal discussion of the weather; though under her eyelashes Cecil had signalled to Linda, 'Talk—talk, girl—say anything.'

And Linda had signalled back, 'Can't. Blank-brained.' But had managed to keep the face she turned towards Mrs. Barrett politely interested.

Presently Cecil made a plunge.

"I am sorry," she said, flushing a little, "that Rodney could not come. You know, I suppose, they wanted him at the office?"

"So he told me this morning."

When she spoke of her son, her face had a shining look on it. Linda felt herself drawn to the fluttering small woman. To Cecil it came as a shock, the reality of her engagement and everything; so far she had not realised that Rodney, when not with her, still existed; that he lived at home, talked to his mother and all of them; and that they, almost certainly, knew him much better than she did. The realisation brought a rush of bright colour to her face.

"Do you find it too hot?" Mrs. Barrett asked timidly.

"Thank you—yes, a little." With a toe Cecil set her chair in motion. It rolled away backwards, silent, majestic. To Cecil, Linda looked alarmingly far away now, and Mrs. Barrett smaller than ever.

Conversation, strained through the fine sieve of selection, became momentarily more attenuated. It was a relief when the door opened to admit Rodney's father.

Mr. Barrett wore a frock coat; a thick watch-chain made a generous curve across his prominent figure; a wet-looking sheaf of grey hair was brushed forward over each ear—perhaps to draw the eye away from his baldness.

Before speaking, he waited to close the door and

to pick his way across the carpet on tiptoe, as though he feared he might crush its redundant garlands. The moments were filled with weighty expectation before he stopped and put his head on one side ; his face was indeterminate with fat, but his mouth well-shaped and flexible. He smiled as he said :

" And which of these ladies has promised to be my daughter-in-law ? Don't tell me, Mamma. I'm going to guess." He laughed like a great happy child. Looking first at one and then at the other of the girls with engaging frankness, he plunged his hands into his pockets, rattling his coins.

There was a horrible pause of silence. Only the fire, cruelly bright and overpowering, seemed to be enjoying the situation. Linda wished Cecil would say something. Cecil was not usually tongue-tied.

Cecil was swallowing hard and wondering why Linda did not speak. It would have been quite easy for Linda to tell the old man which was his son's fiancée. It is significant that neither of the girls looked for ease of the situation from the timid little lady with her toes twining round the legs of her ' occasional.'

Meanwhile Mr. Baret was contentedly jingling his coins and looking from one to the other.

" I can't have my choice," he said slowly, his voice was unpolished and grating, " I can't have my choice ; the boy, it seems, has been beforehand with me."

Already Linda had a faint feeling that there was something likeable about Rodney's father ; to Cecil he was still frankly ' awful.'

" Impulsive generation "—the old man shook his head, though he was smiling—" they don't under-

stand that, because we've lived longer, bought and paid for experience, we must know better than they do. They don't teach 'em sense like that at the 'Varsity—no, not at the 'Varsity."

He repeated the word, naively pleased with the fact that, by paying his son's bills at Cambridge, he had bought a right to the familiar pronunciation. There were plenty of men—he was complacently aware of the fact—men of his own standing, who thought the word was spoken, as spelt, University; who, further, didn't know that his son's college, despite the evidence of the eye, was called 'Maudlin.' He knew it so intimately, that he had one or two little jests on the subject with which he was wont to flavour his conversation.

"Aye, the boy's made his choice." He smiled at the girls, delightfully unaware of their embarrassment, their dread of what he might say further. Mrs. Barrett was not at all embarrassed. She sat with her pale, staring eyes fixed on her husband. She knew 'Papa,' and could trust him.

"And, by Jove," the old man went on with a chuckle, "when both are so charming, I'd have a difficulty in choosing. So p'r'aps it's as well that rogue of mine has saved me the trouble. Mamma, you shall have the pleasure of telling me which is to be my daughter."

"This," said Mrs. Barrett, "is Miss Wolney."

He put his hand to his ear—

"Got a bit of cold and that humming sound in my ears."

"Miss Wolney," his wife repeated in a falsetto.

"What say?—Woolly?"

"Wolney—Cecil Wolney."

"*Sister Wolney*? A nurse, is she? Don't like nurses, they always treat you like a baby."

"Not *Sister—Cecil*," Mrs. Barrett explained with untiring patience.

"Did you say Cecil? That isn't a girl's name." Mr. Barrett spoke loudly. "A girl can't be called Cecil."

"As it happens, I am, though." Cecil was mad with herself that she coloured furiously.

Mr. Barrett pursed up his mouth and looked troubled.

"Whoever called you that?" he asked her.

"I suppose 'my god-fathers and my god-mothers in my baptism,'" Cecil answered glibly.

He turned to his wife.

"What's that about fathers and mothers?"

"'God-fathers and god-mothers.'"

"It is really her name, then? My dear young lady, haven't you got any other?"

"No," Cecil said shortly. Since she had arrived at years of discretion the intermediate 'A.' that stood, of all things, for Augusta, had faded out of her signature.

"Well"—he was clearly making the best of a bad job—"Miss Cecil, if Cecil it has got to be, I am very pleased to welcome you."

His face was unpleasantly near as he laid his hands on her shoulders; for one awful moment Cecil feared that he was about to kiss her; but he only looked into her eyes very steadily. His, under their shaggy grey eyebrows, were small, dark and bright.

"If you're near so good as you're pretty, you'll do," he said slowly.

The rough compliment pleased. Cecil looked at

him more kindly, as he turned away to Linda, saying :

“ Now, tell me, who is this young lady ? ”

“ I am Linda Ray,” she answered for herself, raising her voice a little.

“ What a blessing,” he said, “ to find someone who doesn’t mumble. A pretty name too—Linda Ray. You met my boy down in Cornwall.” He bent and kissed her on the forehead.

Not in the least offensively, as she stated later to Cecil, who was explaining, rather elaborately how, for her part, she had avoided the salute. ‘ Silly old thing ! ’ she finally concluded.

Mr. Barrett lowered himself on to the sofa. He was close to Cecil and opposite Linda, who, conscious that his bright little eyes dwelt frequently upon her, could not help wondering what Rodney had told his father about those days in Cornwall. What had he said of her ? Surely not—her ears tingled—‘ oddly fascinating.’

Mr. Barrett, leaning the fat weight of his body forward on to his knees, with his ‘ best ’ ear towards Cecil, was talking to her, or, for the most part, listening ; weighing her up, probably, in that shrewd brain of his that had acquired for him place, position, wealth, and that knowledge of men and things that had served him as education.

Cecil, trying to shut out of her mind the unwelcome thought that this vulgar old man was, in the future, to stand to her in intimate relationship, tried to think of him as ‘ man ’ only ; and so far succeeded that, recapturing her usual readiness, she chattered, laughed, teased, and looked at him under her eyelashes.

The old man, not averse, it seemed, to flattery from a pretty young woman, yet had the air of reserving his opinion and judgment ; and now and again his eyes rested inquiringly—Cecil would not let herself think approvingly—on Linda Ray. The latter was, meanwhile, carrying on a rather difficult conversation with 'Mamma.' Mamma's interests appeared decidedly limited. She liked books—yes, but they must have a happy ending. For her, 'book' and 'novel' were evidently synonymous terms ; any other printed matter was unplaced ; with the exception, of course, of magazines—the illustrated variety.

"I do like pictures to a story," she said, rather plaintively. "You can't take the same interest in people if you don't know what they are like."

A sudden illumination came to Linda. She had often pondered the reason for certain illustrations of limp men and long-drawn-out women, with an immense moon behind sea-weedy trees and a bit of impossible ruin in the distance. Now she knew their purpose. They were drawn for Mrs. Barrett, they added to the pleasure of her reading.

She proceeded to draw her out on the subject, she was really interested ; though all the time she was conscious of the glance of Mr. Barrett's bright little eyes, and once she thought they shone an approval. It struck her as odd that Mrs. Barrett, who had once been a governess, should have no taste for real literature ; till, with an illumining imagination, she fancied her—rather pretty, in those days, in a fragile, helpless way—she fancied her, then, with scraped-back hair and the hideous bustle of the 'seventies, a little flame in her pale cheeks, preparing to leave her last situation. Sentimentally she would

kiss her engagement ring—she wore it still, dim with age, forget-me-nots formed out of turquoise. She would pause with her hand on her well-worn educational library. Without sufficient courage to burn or drown the detested volumes, she probably, with a little furtive glance round, simply left them behind her ; promising herself—it would have been unladylike to swear it—that she would never open any book but a novel, henceforth and for ever.

She had never, Linda felt quite sure, been tempted to break her vow, or, rather, her promise.

“Mamma,” said her ‘spouse.’

Mrs. Barrett would use the word ‘spouse,’ Linda was sure of it.

“Mamma, where is Edith ? I understood she was going to favour us.”

“She is at a Committee Meeting.” Mrs. Barrett bristled with dignity as she placed her arms horizontally, so that each hand held an elbow. “It is the ‘Society for the Interchange of Ultra-national Objections’ ; the ‘S.I.U.O.,’ Edith calls it.”

Mr. Barrett smiled ; Linda could not be sure whether he was amused or gratified.

“A very good cause,” he stated. Linda was almost certain he was amused, though now he was no longer smiling. “Objections, like mustard, bring out the flavour of everything. I thought, though, she had promised to be here this afternoon. Rodney asked her particularly.”

“She can’t give up her work even for Rodney.” In Mrs. Barrett’s tone was a faint pot-pourri of ancient governess. “All the same, she *is* coming for tea. She will get straight back after the Meeting. She managed to get a substitute for the Tea-shop.”

She fixed her pale eyes on the ornate clock, her lips moved in company with some mental calculation before she concluded: "She should be here in ten minutes."

"You must know, my dear young lady"—Mr. Barrett was addressing Linda—"that my daughter, my daughter Edith that is——" he gave a whimsical smile in the direction of Cecil; Linda was quite sure he was worth knowing, even likeable—"my daughter, Edith, takes life very seriously. She is so new-fashioned—or very, very old-fashioned, is it?—as to think everyone ought to work; that work is not a curse to be limited by Law to as few hours as possible, but a blessing to sweeten life and give it a purpose. Odd of her, isn't it?"—he turned his eyes on to Cecil—"when she might spend all her time dressing up and chasing around after amusement. Now, what do you think?"

"It depends"—Cecil's eyes were on the little embroidered bag with which she was playing—"that depends——" she flashed him a glance. It was wasted. He was intent on the little bag that glittered as she turned it about in the fire-light. Perhaps, Cecil thought, he was unused to pretty things. He might be taught though. The thought was not unpleasing. He was said to be fabulously rich. She might, after all, have a use for him.

She made another cast for his eyes. This time she caught them.

"I mean about dress and amusement—it all depends—at least, very much—you see, if a woman's not pretty or anything——" She swang the little bag round and round by its cords, then, by both hands, her arms curving prettily, she drew it up to

her face and looked over it—"of course if a woman's not pretty and so on—she must find an interest somewhere."

"So that," he said slowly, "is the way of it, is it?" He stretched out and handled the bag. Cecil resented the action; the toy looked pathetically fragile in his big, coarse hand—there were tufts of reddish hair on the backs of the fingers. At that moment Rodney seemed so far away that she had no single satisfaction in the thought of her engagement.

Still fingering her plaything, Mr. Barrett continued:

"Then, arguing contrariwise, there's no need for you, dear young lady, to do anything but dress, look pretty, and just amuse yourself. What do you think, Miss Linda?"

"I can't agree." Linda surprised herself by her eagerness. Gratitude at escaping 'Mamma's' platitudes may have had something to do with it. "No, really. I think all women should work, and yet all have time to dress and amuse themselves."

"That's just what my girl says. You two'll cotton together," said Edith's father.

Only then, Linda remembered that the daughter was said to be a Suffragette; her spirits sank as she questioned: How, in this house of solemn conversation and heavy propriety, could be such anachronism? Was it the force of antagonism? Or did Edith, a female edition of her father, really enjoy plastered hair and the wearing of a thing called a 'jacket'? Linda pictured two large buttons at the waist at the back of it.

"Everyone does like Edith," Mrs. Barrett asserted, complacently.

Mr. Barett broke into a hearty laugh that made the yellow tassels dance at the pillow-ends.

"Don't dare to say that before Edith," he adjured her. "Liked by everyone! What an unnatural sort of a person. No one can really like what no one dislikes—eh, Miss Linda?"

To this Mrs. Barett had no answer. She only turned her small face, with its large insignificant eyes, from one to the other, as much as to say: 'Papa is so clever!'

It was at that moment the door opened and Edith entered.

CHAPTER VII

THE SISTER OF THE HERO

SHE did not wear a jacket. Linda noted the fact quite thankfully.

She was not at all plain. That was Cecil's first thought about her.

Dressed in a dark-toned house-gown relieved by a swinging red girdle, Edith Barrett walked as one who has no need to think of her movements nor consider the impression she makes. She crossed the room as no princess could, and no actress—except one at the very top of the profession. She brought a largeness of atmosphere with her. She was not a big woman; yet, on her entrance, the massive Victorian room seemed to shrink, to bear itself less assertively.

For the rest, she had plentiful dark hair, with a spring in it, eyes like her father's, a dark skin, bright colour, white teeth, thin features, red lips.

She came straight to Cecil.

"I have been looking forward to this moment. Rodney has told me all about you."

Her manner was perfect; the words Cecil resented. All about her indeed! The awful feeling of the unreality of her engagement deepened. She perceived, dimly, that all the time Rodney had possessed a life of his own, full and completed, she

had touched only the outermost edge of it. These were the people Rodney knew really ; to them he talked intimately ; had even discussed *her* with them.

It was by a great effort she smiled, blushed and made appropriate rejoinders. She hardly knew what she was saying. Edith was altogether surprising. For one thing she was positively handsome.

It was with a sense of thanksgiving Cecil realised that they would not clash, but rather serve as foils one for the other. They were about the same height, but in style and colouring absolute opposites. One thing was distinctly soothing—Edith had avoided the common-sounding voice of her father, and her mother's plaintively ' genteel ' utterance ; she spoke pleasingly and with a cultivated accent.

She turned to Linda.

" I know you by name. Rodney has spoken of you often."

Linda blushed, sensitively expecting some reference to Cornwall. Edith did not make it ; she turned with a smile to her mother.

" Is there no tea for us ? "

Mrs. Barrett slipped off her chair, her dull face brightened.

" We were only waiting for you."

" You should not have waited, dear." Edith spoke caressingly, as you would to a child only half understanding but quaintly precious.

" But you know I don't like pouring out for company," her mother said naively.

She fluttered away to the door, which opened at once. The Suffragan-Bishop must have been

stationed behind it. Mrs. Barrett stood aside, waiting whilst her husband with a corpulent bow and a solemn 'May I have the pleasure?' offered his arm to Cecil.

Edith laid a hand on Linda's shoulder.

"Come along, shall we?"

There was something not exactly condescending, perhaps rather protective, in her manner. Linda was not sure that she liked it.

They went downstairs in solemn procession. The way struck Cecil as already painfully familiar; on her heart, like a dead weight, sat the thought that in future she would often go up and down, breathing this heavy air of stagnant respectability. She had not the faintest idea what she ought to say to her partner; he, apparently, did not consider conversation necessary. Once or twice he glanced at her kindly and pressed her arm as though he wanted to assure her that though he owned all this expensive and fully-paid-for luxury, though, in fact, he was Jeremiah Barrett, half-millionaire and Director of Brassysshine, Ltd., she need not, on the whole, be afraid of him. As they went downstairs he breathed heavily, and with his free hand jingled the coins in his pocket.

With the opening of the dining-room door the extent of Mrs. Barrett's 'preparations' burst upon Cecil. She glanced expressively in Linda's direction. Linda was already talking animatedly to Edith, and beyond the fact that the table was long and heavily laden, she took but little notice of it.

Cecil's mind was unoccupied and the size and weight and lavish display of everything crowded upon her.

There was a big silver urn at one end and round it a group of silver and china ; there were dishes with silver covers, china figures presenting baskets of sweets, a glass wheelbarrow loaded with jam with a miniature spade in silver ; there were grapes falling over the edges of a blue glass cornucopia ; there were cakes iced in all sorts of colours ; there were sandwiches reposing in parsley ; and gaudy objects of so wonderful an appearance that only the bold indeed would dare to attack them.

All this and more was faithfully reflected back from the brilliantly polished table ; on which, here and there, were islets of lace and needlework and ribbon ; and flowering plants, the nakedness of their pots decorously swathed in ' art ' muslin.

" Mamma's done it this time," said Jeremiah with a laugh. " Lucky I was done out of my ' mid-day.' A belated reward for devotion."

" What kind of devotion ? " Cecil asked carelessly. She was horribly afraid the sight and the smell of all this food was going to be too much for her.

" Devotion to business, of course."

" Business ? Do you still go to business ? "

" What do you take me for ? "

He pulled out a massive chair from the table. It was the companion of those in the drawing-room, but instead of blue rep was ' in ' red leather.

" What d'you take me for ? Do I look like a bloated aristocrat ? " His eyes twinkled.

" Oh, no—only I thought——Really, I don't think I thought anything about it."

" You heard I was rich, and you thought I'd nothing to do but sit under the money-tree, open my mouth, and swallow the wind-falls."

Cecil laughed.

He shook his head solemnly.

"Nothing funny," he said, "about money-getting."

"No; but the picture you drew."

"Can't draw for nuts. Rodney could though, from a little 'un. I gave him a pencil before ever we breeched him. I thought he'd go scrawling round and round. Not he. From the first he considered, and went to work as though he knew all about it. Drew an egg with the end chipped ready for eating. 'Goggo,' he called it. That's why I made him into an architect."

"Because he called an egg 'goggo'?"

Cecil stifled a yawn. The Rodney belonging to this old man wasn't her Rodney. Hers was the present-day, completed Rodney. She took no interest in the beginnings of him.

Jeremiah, thinking to please her, went on with his story.

"No, no; because he wasn't never happy lest he'd hold of a pencil. That egg was the start. He was always at it. I tried to wean him off it—no money in it, see. He wanted to please me, bless him, but he couldn't hide from me where his heart was. And after all, why shouldn't he do as he likes? I've worked hard enough for the money. 'Barett's Brassyshine.' 'Brassy-shine Ltd.' That's what I am. And I'm proud of it."

Barett's Brassyshine! Certain posters jumped to Cecil's mind, things she had heretofore never connected with Rodney. She looked down at her plate whilst the old man continued with fat self-satisfaction:

"It took some thinking out I can tell you. There's only two things with money in them. What's wasted and what'll save trouble. Brassy-shine puts a polish on without any rubbing. Twopence a tin or three tins for fourpence ha'penny. They all buy the three tins, they can't resist the catchpenny saving. And at this very moment there are servants wasting the stuff and making me rich all over the country. It's all in my hands really; but as the boy won't have a look in, I'll have to see about another working Director."

"How—how very interesting."

There was hot buttered tea-cake on Cecil's plate and a pool of jam; she had not wanted the latter but old Barrett had insisted on helping her to it; the sight of its glaucous edge meeting the dulling butter that had flowed from the tea-cake sickened her. It was typical, somehow, of life in the heavy Victorian house, the life that, in the near future, threatened to engulf her.

"Interesting?" Jeremiah, throwing himself back in his chair, plunged his hands into his pockets. Cecil could not help noticing some newly fallen gout of butter on his waistcoat. "Interesting? 'course it's interesting. Nothing more so than the growth of a big thing out of a little one. I s'pose you know all about an oak and an acorn, young lady?"

"In little green glasses? We used to grow them at school. Usually the water got nasty and they had to be thrown out. It was called Nature Study."

"Yes—yes"—he pushed his chair farther back from the table—"that's all right. But I have held

an acorn in my hand and thought and thought about it till the whole world reeled about me. Growth! the wonder of the whole world is in it. Just such a bit of a thing my stuff was at first. I made experiments up in the cistern-room. We only ran to a jerry-built 'semi' at that time. Lord! I love to hear the gurgle and swish of water still, makes me feel young again, fighting you know, and all before you—'messaging,' Mamma called it. I was preparing the ground for my oak-tree."

He drew his chair nearer and his tone became confidential.

"Difficulty was—to get what I wanted and keep clear of anything poisonous. Again and again I came up against that—poison!——"

"But no one wanted to eat the stuff," Cecil objected as, with a massive silver knife, she dissected her tea-cake.

The old man laughed out.

"'Course not. I was going to say I'd like to see 'em. I wouldn't really. You can never be sure. But it don't do to have things lying about that are poisonous. There's kids and domestic animals."

"You succeeded in the end?" Cecil stole a look at Linda and Edith; with the groaning table deadening their conversation, she could yet judge they were getting on famously. She wished etiquette had not forced the old man upon herself. He was dreadfully boring, and not so amusingly vulgar as she had expected.

Linda found it quite easy to talk to Edith Barrett. Perhaps she drew on her credit as a good listener, for Edith did most of the talking. The great tea-

urn partially shut off the others and there was no attempt at general conversation.

"What will you have?—help yourself."

There was just a trace of the patron in Edith's tone, Linda could not help thinking.

"Not for me"—as Linda was about to hand on some of the display beyond the tea-urn; "I have my own, here, thank you."

Her 'own' was a plate of rather thick brown bread and butter.

"Don't you like sweet things?" Linda asked. "I always choose cakes for their colour. When I come to eat them I am nearly always disappointed."

"And you don't lose your faith in colour?"

"No, nor in the crock at the foot of the rainbow."

"Rainbows are so unpractical. They tell you rain is over when everyone knows it."

"Beautiful things have no need to be practical."

"I don't agree. The beauty of a thing depends on its practicability."

"Your world must be a grey place," said Linda.

"Not at all. It is full of light and colour. A very intense world, I assure you."

"You have so many interests?"

"Too many. You have hit on my besetting sin. The world is too full of voices, and I can't help listening."

"Mrs. Barett said something about a tea-shop——"

"That is only one thing among many. You see—some of us—we want to find out about Woman's Work from within. Just now, I'm doing Tea-shops."

The off-hand, consciously superior way in which

Edith spoke recalled for Linda the tone of her school companions, who, after removal to a higher Form, would remark, 'We are doing such-and-such a subject.'

She smiled to herself slightly—growing-up didn't seem to make people so very different.

"How do you manage it?" she wanted to know.

"Apply for a vacancy, take a low wage; supply one another with references."

"It doesn't seem right."

"My dear child, is anything definitely right or wrong in the world? You must look beyond—to the purpose. Our purpose is good——"

"Yes, I know that"—Linda's voice had not much conviction—"only, tell me: the places you get by giving each other references, aren't there others—real people—who need the situations?"

Edith laughed.

"I like your 'real' people. I flatter myself I am real, intensely so."

"You know what I mean?"

"I should not own it if I did not. As it happens I do. But that is a small evil and only temporary. We only hold the place for a week or two and then resign—in favour, of course, of a 'real' person."

"And what then?"

"You mean, what do we do with our knowledge? Docket for use, some of it, statistics and so on. Sometimes we write for the magazines or papers."

"'Tales of the Tea-shops, or, Behind the Bone of a Button?'"

"Evidently you know something about it. You'll have glanced articles through in a railway carriage?"

"I have," Linda admitted. "I always thought, though, they were written by journalists paid by the papers."

"Some are. You can always tell the difference, though. Theirs are written from the outside, with the view of pleasing the Public. Ours are from the inside. Our aim is to disturb the public complaisancy."

"And you get them published?" Linda asked naively.

"Sometimes—not often."

"And after that?"

"We go on working." She paused to fill—carefully, capably, for the third time—her father's teacup.

Linda was fired by an excited admiration for this steady yet flame-like creature. She thought of great red and yellow tulips; the red and yellow that clash in anything else but a tulip.

Was Edith Barrett really a Suffragette? she wondered, growing hot, and daring herself to ask her.

"Is it true?" she blurted out suddenly on the crest of a wave of courage. "It must be true, though, because it was Rodney who told me——" In her excitement the Christian name slipped out without her knowledge. "It is really true, is it, that you are a Suffragette?"

Edith's face clouded.

"So much is true, that I want a vote; personally, I want every single thing the world has to offer. For men as well as for women, for women as well as for men, I want it. But——" She played with her teaspoon. For the first time she seemed to have lost her assurance.

"You want everything; but you don't think all things are expedient." That was Linda's suggestion.

"I don't care a straw for expediency. Not so far as I am concerned. What do I matter? Does any one of us matter, individually? The good of the whole, that is the only thing of consequence."

"But the whole is made up of individuals. If each ear of corn is starved and unhealthy, the harvest won't be worth reaping." Linda was rather pleased with her statement.

"That isn't a good illustration," Edith said calmly. "We can be compared better to rooks in a cornfield. There ought to be enough for all; there would be if the strong were not also the greedy. The point to me is, not whether I get enough individually, but whether, as nearly as possible, the corn is divided to the ultimate good of the whole flock of us."

"You do not think, then, votes for women good for the whole?"

"Not at present, any more than universal suffrage would be. For the matter of that, a large proportion of the present voters are unready. It is a matter, of course, of education. But that is a very big subject." She took and folded another piece of bread and butter. The plate was half empty. Edith had evidently conquered an art that so far had baffled Linda: she could talk and eat without any difficulty. This, in some way, marked her as a working woman.

"So Rodney calls me a Suffragette, does he?" Edith's eyes were on her bread and butter. Her face, bent forward, looked less hard in expression.

"He told me so once."

"Did he seem pleased about it?"

"I hardly know. I am sure he admires you."

"Good old Roddy!" said Edith; "there is something oddly fascinating about him."

Linda felt her heart quicken. Perhaps this 'oddly fascinating' was with the Baretts one of those familiar phrases that make up household-flavoured conversation.

"Yet," Edith went on, "few people really understand him. Because he is so lovable they set him down as yielding. He is not, except as regards non-essentials. Because he is unreserved——"

"But, is he?" Linda murmured. Edith took no notice.

"Because he is unreserved, they conclude there is no depth in him, that he is all on the surface. Rod isn't"—her face had softened. "So few people really know him. Father himself doesn't. He has told me, often, I ought to be the son. I like him to say it. Who is not weak-minded enough to love flattery? I know really it is not so. For all I have done and am doing, I know well enough I am not a patch on Rodney. The worst of it is, things have been made too easy for him, he has had no chance of toughening his fibres. I did hope all might not go too smoothly"—she nodded slightly towards Cecil who was at present talking animatedly to Mrs. Barrett. Her subject was clothes, with special attention to millinery. Mrs. Barrett seemed impressed. Mr. Barrett, meanwhile, was giving his attention to cake and plenty of it. His eyes were twinkling.

Edith had lowered her voice, though it was quite

unnecessary ; Cecil's voice and ready laugh held all her own and 'Mamma's' attention, and 'Papa's' deaf ear was towards the tea-urn.

Edith went on.

"It would have done Rodney so much good to be brought up sharply against something. He was, for a little while, but not long enough. When he came back from Cornwall I saw a great improvement—he was more manly, No, not exactly that—I had a feeling that I could trust the shaping of things to him. Just that. I thought he had failed to get something he very greatly wanted. It was too much, I suppose, to hope for. We Baretts get everything far too easily."

"Has your father ?"

"No. I dare say he has used up all the fight in the family. It is not good for us," sighed Edith.

With quiet joy Linda noted the illogic of this logical woman. After all, she was not altogether superior to the claims of individuality.

It was reckless of Linda, but she longed to hear more of Rodney. She knew one side of him, the merry, companionable side that was for everyone ; a little, perhaps, of the thoughtful side that was for his friends ; now she realised there was yet another Rodney, known only to his intimates. She had a sick longing to know more of that Rodney, the one who, at present, was strange to her. She was aware that, so far, she had not analysed his character. He was for her just himself, different from anyone else ; but she had not formulated any idea concerning that difference. To pull him to pieces as Edith was doing would have been to her presumptuous ; there was even something a little indecorous in

viewing the picture of Rodney as seen by his sister. Yet, all the time, she was tingling with interest.

'I am living now. All this is living!' she was telling herself in an excited undertone.

In Cornwall, life had been so peaceful, had flowed so smoothly. There she had been happy; now she was, when she had time to think of it, desperately unhappy; yet at the moment it seemed worth while. Life was opening out before her—a bigger thing than she had imagined.

Others were working. She could work too. It was the individual that was of no consequence. She had grasped that, she thought, and insisted to herself that it was only from a broad point of view that she took any interest in Rodney Barrett.

"You are interested in my brother?" Edith seemed to read her thoughts.

"Yes, of course," she hesitated; then added, "Cecil is my greatest friend."

Edith looked at her for a moment, ruthless, bright-eyed. Then she said:

"And yet you don't realise the need for the emancipation of women."

"If you mean by emancipation, the vote, vulgar shrieking, and the breaking of windows, I certainly don't," Linda said. She was angry, without being able exactly to define the cause of her anger.

Edith took the last piece of her brown bread and butter.

"When women are emancipated," she said slowly and without looking at Linda, "they will have no further need of deception."

Linda coloured, furious with herself; she almost hated Rodney's sister.

"Deceit is the natural outcome of slavery," Edith went on dispassionately. "Woman will have to leave her slavery many years behind before she learns to be truthful."

Now Linda had been brought up on old-fashioned lines by Aunt Emma. A lie was a disgraceful thing, soiling the lips of the utterer. She had told no lie, she hotly repudiated the suggestion.

Cecil *was* her greatest friend. What did this self-assured girl—however did Rodney come by such a sister?—what did she mean by her imputation? Linda's own inward rage ought to have enlightened her. However she begged the question.

"I think," she said, "on the whole, women in the past had a better position than they have at present, or are likely to have in the future."

"Better in what way?" Edith's eyes were questioning.

Linda met them bravely.

"I mean they were happier."

"You think they should expect happiness?"

"At least they can aim at it."

"Do you remember what Tolstoy says on the subject?"

Linda shook her head. From Aunt Emma's point of view Tolstoy was—well, shall we say—unsettling.

"I know about him, of course," Linda said; "a reformer and all that, and lived like a peasant. But I've read nothing of his. Why did you ask me?"

"Because you made me think of his words: 'He whose aim is his own happiness, is bad; he whose aim is the good opinion of others, is weak; he whose aim is the happiness of others, is virtuous; he whose aim is God, is great.'"

"But that is splendid!"

Edith smiled full at her. Her beauty seemed to blaze out all of a sudden to Linda.

"Splendid," Linda repeated, "and yet——"

"Yes?"

"I hardly know how to express it. Are splendid things true always? I mean from all points of view."

"If you would achieve, you must not spend yourself on more than one point of view."

"Very well," said Linda, with sudden decision. "My point of view is—we are meant to be happy."

"What makes you think so?" Edith tapped the table lightly, perhaps impatiently, with her fingers. Her hands were coarse, like her father's. Linda resented the fact, not in, but for, Edith. "What makes you think we are meant to be happy? I know it is a common claim; but you seem uncommonly sure of it."

"I am." Linda's smile made her face suddenly radiant. "I can't tell you why, but I *know* it."

Yet, it was only since she had been plunged into the first unhappiness of her life that she had known it.

"I think we shall get on together," Edith said quietly.

She rose to her feet. The heavy hot tea was over. The jam was still on Cecil's plate, the butter had congealed and not mingled with it. Cecil thrust her hand through the arm of her future mother-in-law. Her air was pretty and affectionate; but in her flushed cheeks and dark-rimmed eyes, Linda could read boredom and weariness.

" She is rather pretty, don't you think ? " Edith said casually.

It was only then Linda recognised how little interest Rodney's sister had shown in the girl he had chosen.

CHAPTER VIII

THE EDUCATION OF A HERO

THE guests had gone. The heavy Victorian house ponderously considered its verdict. Papa Barrett stood back to the fire, hands in pockets, heels on the fender, body pendulous, eyes on the toes of his shapeless slippers.

Seated, her chin in her hand, her elbow on the arm of one of the big rep chairs, Edith looked into space. She had been photographed just so for a magazine portrait. Out of the corner of his eye Jeremiah Barrett marked her position and thought she was posing. Yet the attitude was a natural one, and it was only by chance the photographer had caught it.

'Mamma' was squatting on the hearthrug. She had turned up her 'company' gown and displayed the satin flounce of an alpaca petticoat. Her arms clasped her knees tightly. She did not look at all comfortable, yet it was with her a favourite position when 'no one' was present. This was one of the numerous small ways in which she stretched out a futile hand towards the unconventional. The dull glow of the dying fire gave an illusion of health to her thin, drawn features, but her eyes were as glassy and unmeaning as though hidden by spectacles.

Jeremiah spoke first.

"Well," he said, with an effort at jocularly, "now they are gone, I suppose we pick them to pieces. What does everyone think of young madam?"

Into the ensuing silence 'Mamma' dipped a toe timidly.

"You can always trust Rodney for taste. Miss Wolney is like a picture."

"A modern one, then. A bit too modern for my liking. There's nothing of substance about her." Jeremiah glanced approvingly on his comfortable Victorian furniture. "Nay," he said, "the other little girl 'ud have been the one for my money."

Edith lost her look of abstraction.

"I like Linda Ray; she has possibilities."

"Linda? Did you say Linda? What odd names people do choose nowadays—and the other, Cecil——" 'Mamma' turned from one to the other, palely questioning.

'Papa' chuckled. In his own family, with the voices to which he was familiar, his deafness was little apparent.

"Live and learn," he said. "I'd always supposed Cecil was a man's name, and a poor fool of a name at that."

"It is a woman's name, too," 'Mamma' told him; "you'll find it occurring now and again in well-born families."

Her husband gave her a glance of amusement.

"Can't say I know much about all that lot. I don't know why people need go further than the Bible for names. Though I suppose I ought to, seeing they tacked Jeremiah on to me. There are plenty of sensible names though in the Bible."

"Eveline's not a Biblical name," Mrs. Barrett suggested with timid archness.

"I'm not responsible for it. They named you without consulting me," he chortled comfortably; "and if I'd had my way, the boy'd have been plain John without any Rodney."

Mrs. Barrett bridled. She never forgot she had been a Miss Rodney—'The Hereford Rodneys,' as she always added in parenthesis.

"The Rodneys are a very good family," she reminded him gently.

"My dear, I must take your word for it. I can't say I have met any very favourable specimens."

Mrs. Barrett coloured.

"No offence, Mamma. Mind you, I don't hold folks responsible for their relatives. I chose you without any bias, and I've always stood in with my bargain. I don't bear the Rodneys any ill-will, seeing Edith, here, took her good looks from them."

"Not the eyes, though," Mrs. Barrett stated, as it seemed with unnecessary insistence. "Our son has the true Rodney eye—grey with a slight suggestion of green in it."

"We can do without any green," laughed her husband good-naturedly. "As a matter of fact"—the phrase was a favourite with him and he handled it weightily—"as a matter of fact, the boy is the very spit of my brother John as was on the railway. Poor chap, he'd have done well, he would; he'd got it in him." He looked down in melancholy mood at the aggressively floral hearth-rug.

"You did very well for the widow and children," Mrs. Barrett reminded him with a touch of asperity.

"So I did ought to"—he looked up with spirit.

"He'd have done well by you and our kids if it 'ud been t'other way about, John would. He was a good sort, brother John, and Rodney's the spit of him."

Out of the past to Mrs. Barett rose the wraith of her husband's brother. He wore a G.W.R. guard's uniform. Had it not been so unchristian, Eveline Barett would have been tempted to thank her own narrow-minded and most genteel Providence that brother John had disappeared with the dim years of the jerry-built 'semi.' The guard's uniform would have been incompatible with the stately Victorian house. And 'Papa' had nothing to regret as regards the widow and children. The former was long since dead, and the latter had emigrated. There was really no need at all to refer to them. As to the suggested likeness, no one could for a moment fancy her Rodney in a guard's uniform! He was a gentleman!

So was brother John, uniform and all, in Jeremiah's conception of one. But, like many another pair who live in outward harmony, he and his wife saw not eye to eye in the things that mattered.

Edith had all the time been following her own line of thought, and now she brought out, rather suddenly:

"I cannot think what Rodney sees in her."

"Miss Wolney is undoubtedly pretty, well-bred, and I fancy kind-hearted," her mother said reprovingly. In her eyes Cecil was already one of the family and therefore beyond reach of criticism.

"Father," asked Edith, "what do you think of her?"

"If she was marrying any man's son but my

own, I wouldn't think twice about her. Young eyes, more often than not, are caught by a bit of tinsel. To my mind, there's nothing much *genu-ine* about young madam."

"Indeed you are wrong," Mrs. Barrett flashed out excitedly; "not but what the very best people do, nowadays. She doesn't. You don't suppose, when I kissed her—— I'm certain the colour's her own and everything."

Jeremiah shook his fat shoulders. "I'm not saying she has any need of—aids to beauty, isn't it?—at present. But you've run off into a siding. When I say her, I mean her, or she—whichever is the grammar of it. It's herself that isn't *genu-ine*. Said 'How *interesting*!' when she wasn't a bit *interested*. Asked me prettily about the business, while all along she was despising me for it. Rolled her eyes at me, while she thought, 'How can this vulgar old brute be dear Rodney's father?' "

"I am sure she would not. You don't do her justice," Mrs. Barrett assured him.

Edith broke in equitably:

"I don't see that we ought to blame her for her limitations. We don't ask more from a rose than the scent and colour it gives us."

"Well put, my dear. What makes my gorge rise is that while she despises me she is trying to curry favour with me."

"But isn't that natural?"

"Natural enough. That don't make me like it."

Mrs. Barrett's Victorian bridle contrasted oddly with her unconventional attitude.

"After all, it is Rodney's affair rather than ours, isn't it?"

Her husband laughed rather ruefully.

"That's just the difficulty. If it was me, I'd be jolly quick off with my bargain. I did think," he protested, "that Rod had more sense in him. I could have understood if it 'ud been t'other, now. She's as pretty and peart as a bird, she is. I like the straight way she looks at you. None of the 'glad eye' about that one. Her voice is low and sweet too, as a woman's should be. I know I'm rough myself, but I like women dainty and soft-spoken. Then she doesn't keep up a continual chatter. You coached me, Mamma, to behave myself pretty to Rodney's one; but I own I'd have liked a chance with the other." He thrust up his great hand and pulled at one of his wet sheafs of hair till he looked like a lop-eared terrier.

"Can't think what Rod was thinking of," he ruminated.

Mrs. Barrett looked uncomfortable.

"I cannot think," she said primly, "that this discourse is at all necessary, or desirable. Rodney has chosen Miss Wolney. That he has chosen Miss Wolney shows that Miss Ray's style, even had he met her before his engagement, would not have appealed to him."

"But he *had* met her"—so Jeremiah blundered.

"Yes, he did," Edith followed up quietly; "it was down in Cornwall. Not that that is anything. Of course, he has met all sorts of women. I own that makes it all the stranger that he should have chosen Cecil." She moved her position. "I cannot help feeling rather disappointed in Rodney."

"As far as that goes," said her father, "matri-

mony's a leap we have to take blindfold. Rodney might have made a worse mess of the matter."

"He has no low tastes," his mother put in; "he would never have stooped to a ballet-girl or a barmaid."

"Some barmaids and ballet-girls no doubt make good wives." Sex-championship drew the remark from Edith.

"No doubt—for barmen and ballet-men, if there are such things," her mother told her.

"Anyhow, Rodney must have a lady," his father said naively; "he's had the education of a gentleman, and, what's more, he *is* a gentleman, bottom-through, is Rodney. This Miss Wolney—she's good family and all that—dashed if I know why I aren't contented. I aren't, though, that's the long and short of it. Difficulty is"—he pulled at his coat lapels and settled his neck in his collar—"difficulty is, I don't want to hurt the boy's feelings. It's a dead cert he'll ask me. What have I got to say to him?"

"All the usual things that sound big and mean nothing," suggested Edith.

"I'm afraid that wouldn't wash with Rodney."

Mamma Barrett rocked herself gently; to her cheeks came the flush of inspiration.

"I shall tell him that already I look on her as a daughter."

Edith's eyes softened. She was loyal to her mother; in spite of clear-eyed perceptions of outward oddity, loved her deeply.

"That will please Rodney, I know," she said gently.

"What," Jeremiah asked her, "will you tell him?"

We know you—straight to the point and devil help your listener.”

Edith waited a moment before saying :

“ I shall tell him I want to know more of her.”

“ There’s one thing,” Jeremiah remarked with sudden caution, “ you won’t, any of you, tell him what I said about the other. Now the thing’s done, there’s no good unsettling Roddy.”

Edith jumped up from her seat and, placing her hands on his shoulders, shook his great bulk lightly.

“ You don’t suppose it will make any difference to *him* what we think, do you ? ”

“ It ought to,” said Rodney’s father. But he smiled whimsically.

CHAPTER IX

THE HERO AND HIS FAMILY

It was not till after dinner that the two girls had a chance of talking things over.

"I suppose I must call on them," Mrs. Wolney had said, rather reluctantly.

Mr. Wolney jested as usual. The atmosphere was a strained one; but to Linda's satisfaction—she must have had a qualm of secret doubt as to her friend's moral standing—Cecil struck a happy note as to her future relatives, dwelling on their kind welcome, calling Mrs. Barrett 'too sweet for words,' and Edith 'distinguished and handsome.'

"The old man hails from Yorkshire, doesn't he?" asked Mr. Wolney, "so one may be permitted the use of a Yorkshire expression and suppose that he 'stinks of brass,' or does he 'shine' of it?"

"Don't, Mortimer," Mrs. Wolney interjected.

"I don't mind, really I don't." Cecil laughed happily. "Mr. Barrett is quite an old dear. We are excellent friends already. I'm quite sure he thinks me charming. I shall not be surprised to find the stately Edith is jealous. I believe she looks on me as an intruder. Never mind. I am going to *make* them all in love with me."

Her father, as well as her mother, looked at her with credulous fondness. It was characteristic of

both, though, that in secret they had deplored their daughter's engagement. 'There's nothing the matter with *him* ; but, my dear, his people !' In spite of this then, they had never contemplated using their power, even their influence, against it. They were so very *un-Victorian*.

After dinner, Mr. and Mrs. Wolney being obliged to attend some stately political function, the two girls, with the sensation of breathing more freely, ordered coffee and cigarettes in Cecil's sanctum ; and, throwing aside all pretence, gave themselves up to the rare luxury of saying just what they thought about everything.

Cecil began with :

" Wasn't it awful ? "

" Not so bad," Linda owned, " as I expected."

" My dear—the house ! "

" It is ugly, of course, and rather depressing ; but it didn't shriek and clash vulgar cymbals."

" Poor Rodney ! " Cecil slowly blew a cloud of tawny smoke towards the ceiling.

" It won't matter to him." Linda knocked off her cigarette ash thoughtfully. " It's like the faces of people. When you've lived with them always you don't consider whether they are ugly or handsome."

" But that house ! "

" That ' house ' reads ' home ' for Rodney."

Cecil looked incredulous.

" I am glad now—I was put out at the time—but I'm glad now he was not with us. I can just fancy his dear honest eyes appealing to me not to judge them too harshly. I can see him wince when the old man muddled his tenses or adjectived his adverbs

—not that I know anything about them myself, unless they are used incorrectly. I can see his discomfort when his mother—— You know—in her mincy way she's just as vulgar as the horrid old man."

"And just now you said she was 'too sweet for words.'"

"I *had* to. You don't suppose I'll let them know that already I rue my bargain."

"But, Cecil——"

"I suppose you think I am talking rank heresy." She threw the end of her cigarette into the fender. "Of course, I don't mean it exactly; still, I can't help repeating what I've said before—who was the triple-dyed idiot who conceived the idea of families? People's people are never so nice as people themselves. You must have noticed that."

"Of course. Sometimes I wonder why it is they are not occasionally nicer than the people."

"Of course, it is natural that you should know the nicest of any set or family."

Lighting another cigarette, Cecil dismissed that part of the subject airily.

"What I feel so glad about," she said, "is that I got over the first shock without Rodney. I should have perfectly hated seeing him ashamed and embarrassed."

"He wouldn't have been, though."

"How can you tell? You don't know him as well as I do. Rodney's most awfully particular. Of course, in that way, he does a little show his origin. You can be too particular, can't you?" Her cigarette had failed to light well, and it seemed to claim the greater part of her interest. "You

understand what I mean. Things ought to come naturally."

"Rodney is quite the last person to be anything but natural." Because she felt so much, Linda spoke in a constrained fashion and coldly.

Cecil looked at her sharply.

"You don't dislike Rodney, do you?"

"Of course not. Why?"

"Nothing. Only, sometimes I fancy—— Oh, I don't know." She looked at her cigarette, said again "I don't know," and still seemed troubled.

"I wonder"—she burst out at last—"what you really do think of him?"

"I—I think him good enough even for you." Linda's voice had deepened, she did not look at her friend while she was speaking.

"You darling," Cecil cried warmly. She slipped her legs over her chair arm. It was a low one, and even in that position she looked graceful. "You know"—she went on—"it is all true in a way. I'm not going to pretend humility and rot like that. I am quite aware people will say I am marrying beneath me. You'd have laughed if you'd known. All dinner time I was picturing the wedding, and poor Mother on the arm of old Brassyshine; and father looking down at Mamma Barrett as though he'd caught an odd specimen. Bother it all—how can I help what people say! Sometimes I think I'll run away on the sly and be married."

"Oh, no, Cecil, you couldn't!"

"I suppose I couldn't, not really—I mean not give up the satin and orange-blossom, the cake and all of it. A girl naturally wants the 'star' part just once in her life. Oh, dear, you do mix me up, and

there was something I so much wanted to tell you——”

Linda's heart was beating angrily. If Cecil really loved Rodney, could she speak so of his parents? Could she plan to slight them?

As though reading her thoughts, Cecil went on smilingly :

“And the old dears would simply dote on a wedding. The vulgarity of it all would so appeal to them——”

Linda could not but admit it.

“And I shall be awfully proud of Rodney.” Oddly enough, Cecil seemed to protest it.

“I suppose—will it be very soon?” Linda heard her voice tremble, as the anguish of her own empty, ended life seemed to rush and engulf her. “The wedding, I mean?” she ended bravely.

“We've said not a word about that at present. There's no hurry, thank Heaven! Rodney said something about beginning in a small way. I don't see the fun of that, thank you! It's now, while I am young, I want a good time, and I'm going to have it. The Brassy man has plenty of money. If he wants me for his son, he must pay for it.”

“Supposing he doesn't?”

The point just struck Linda. If a momentary hope flickered up, she blew it out loyally. Though there were moments when she thought Cecil could be happy without Rodney, she knew too well he never now could be happy without Cecil. The very graveness and difference of him when with Cecil had shown her that all too plainly. No! This thing would go on. There was no crying off her own share in it. Once remembrance came of kind,

placid Aunt Emma. Why not rush away to Aunt Emma? All the while she knew quite well she did not want to go back to Cornwall. There is something compelling in suffering. The dear Lord Himself, had His prayer been granted, would not have let the Cup pass from Him.

All this passed through Linda's mind before Cecil had time to answer :

"Doesn't want me? old Jeremiah! But of course he does though. I should think so, indeed. You could see that plain enough. It was perfectly sickening the way he devoted himself to me. I don't believe Rodney would have liked it. I expect he's horridly jealous. Oh! dear—wasn't tea horrid? Jam, my dear, and hot tea-cake!"

"There were some beautiful cakes."

"Did you enjoy them?"

"Not much. I never do at other people's houses. Besides, I was busy talking to the daughter."

"You monopolised her," Cecil declared rather jealously, "you had much the best of it. At all events she is educated and doesn't talk with a grating sound like an unoiled engine. I do wish the old man could have been thin. Fat intensifies vulgarity. Don't you think so?"

"Don't *you* think," Linda suggested, "it is rather horrid of us talking like this? After all, they *are* Rodney's people."

"I thought you were so great on the truth," Cecil retorted.

Twice in one day! Linda thought, recalling Edith Barrett's stab on the same subject.

Cecil went on :

"Often and often you've said so, and now I *am*

being truthful. I'll have to lie like a trooper to Rodney though. Of course I shall hate myself for it. The worst of it is, I'll have to keep it up even after I'm married—for ever and ever."

"They may all improve when you know them better. I think there is something about the old man that's rather likeable. I am sure he is clever."

"What's clever? For all I care he might be the silliest old owl in the kingdom if he'd only been a gentleman. It's all very well for you. You've not got to have him for a relation. They'll get on my nerves, the whole pack of them. I shall be rude to them, I know I shall, before I've done. And then Rodney will hate me."

She was walking up and down now, and her eyes were suspiciously misty. It seemed to Linda she had struck a truer note. She did not want to fall short of Rodney's idea of her—that is why Cecil was really troubled about his relations.

What was to be done? Truth? Aunt Emma always said: 'If you are strong enough to be true, you need not fear anything.'

'I always speak my mind,' had been the un-failing assertion of one of the nastiest of Linda's acquaintances. She had wondered why the boast invariably comes from a mind that is displeasing. In her early impetuous teens, Linda, herself, had tried marching under the All-Truth standard; and life became almost impossible.

Here all seemed a mass of confusion. There was Cecil's love, there was Rodney's, and again the claims of his people. It was all very well for Edith, the onlooker, to quote Tolstoy. Life isn't a bow and arrow and plenty of time to choose your bull's-eye.

There is a puzzling choice of weapons, and people pressing them on you and people snatching them from you; people obscuring your outlook, and people wanting to teach you. If only you could get quietly away by yourself somewhere and think!

And here was Cecil plainly expecting advice from her—from Linda! Or, if not advice, help of some sort. With a faint sense of satisfaction that it was so, Linda tried to flog her weary and baffled mind to a final effort. She must not fail Cecil!

"Why bother about the future," she asked: "you've got through to-day's trial very creditably. You've won over the old man, and if you re-trim a few hats for poor little 'Mamma,' she will be yours for ever."

Cecil brightened at the suggestion.

"She really isn't half bad," she said readily. "She is just a little bit afraid of me, I fancy; and, in a way, that is not a bad beginning. I have an idea, Linda, that they don't hit it off very well with Rodney. Of course he's too nice to say so, but they don't really value him; they think the sister has all the brains. Of course he only got a Pass B.A. He didn't bother about Honours, I expect. I am sure I shouldn't. But I fancy the old man thinks he did not get his money's worth at Cambridge; also he looks down on Rodney's profession as a sort of gentlemanly pastime. And Rodney's awfully good at it, really. It's silly, too, because people have to have houses; so, naturally, someone must build them. And churches and museums. I can't see myself that the museums are wanted, but someone must or they wouldn't build them. I've seen some of Rodney's drawings. Beautiful

they are—so clean, not rubbed out or smudgy anywhere. As I say, I don't think his people appreciate him. It's often like that in a family—the best one is underrated, misunderstood——”

“ Did Rodney say he was misunderstood ? ”

“ Say ! My dear, you don't know Rodney. Of *course* he doesn't. But I feel it somehow. It's a compliment, really, that people of that sort should not think much of him.”

“ I have an idea they do, though.”

“ You had better dispose of that idea then or you will be disappointed. Rodney does not seem to belong to them really. I suspect he had a lonely childhood.”

“ He does not strike me at all like that ; he is so full of fun and lively.”

“ On the surface. Linda, wouldn't it be scrumptious if it turned out that Rodney did not belong to them, that he'd been adopted, or something ? ” She waltzed a turn or two. “ I shouldn't be a bit surprised. You do read of such things. He'd been left with them as a baby or something. Wouldn't it be glorious ? ”

“ I don't think it would.”

Linda felt hurt for Rodney. “ I think he is better as he is—just as his birth and family have made him. I am sure *he* would not like to find out they did not belong to him.”

“ No—I suppose he wouldn't. Aren't people funny ? ”

“ It seems to me, Cecil, that if you love a man, your love ought to be like sunshine, able to gild all his surroundings.”

“ Very pretty, my dear ; but I wonder how

you'd feel if you had to take Papa and Mamma Barrett for better for worse."

"I don't know. I think I should be glad to get hold of a father and mother at all. You see, I have never had any."

"Therefore you know nothing about their drawbacks and limitations. Not that I've a word against my old dears. But then, from the very first I have brought them up properly."

She sat down and began to strum on the piano. The crash of the notes suited the turmoil that was in the brain of Linda. Amid the folly, confusion, and cross-purposes of Life, only one thing seemed quite clear, at all costs Rodney Barrett must be happy.

'Edith may say what she likes, but I know, I do know, I shall always know that we are *meant* to be happy.'

So Linda, striking out blindly, not for her own but another's happiness !

CHAPTER X

THE NURSE OF THE HERO

MRS. BARETT was in her bedroom. In its heavy Victorian setting she looked like a piece of worn and inexpensive jewellery placed inadvertently in a massive presentation casket; almost as though she had come there by accident.

The toilet-table was spread with magnificent silver. There were the Reynolds heads in relief on the backs of brushes and tops of powder-boxes. Mrs. Barrett took a timid delight in the possessive contemplation of them; but, having let down her limp dun-coloured tresses, for practical purposes she drew from the back of a drawer a worn wood-backed brush and a horn comb with three teeth missing.

She was so small, and the scale of her furniture so ostentatiously massive, that the looking-glass only gave her a view of the top of her head where the hair had grown scanty. This did not matter, for, as she brushed conscientiously, counting out her nightly tale of strokes first on the one side and then on the other, her pale glassy eyes were not taking in her surroundings.

She was asking herself with a little sick doubt—
'Am I jealous? Mothers are said to be jealous. I ought to like her. No doubt I shall like her. I

shall be proud to say, "My daughter was a Miss Wolney." But all the while she could not hide from herself her abject dread of meeting the Wolneys.

From the adjoining dressing-room—for many years now habit had made its possession a luxury to Jeremiah and Eveline, instead of, as at first, a nuisance—through the closed intervening door came sounds of sluicing and a humming attempt at a rag-time. Mrs. Barrett quickened her brushing—'*eighty-seven, eighty-eight, eighty-nine*——' The dressing-room door would soon open, and 'Papa' would expect her nightly toilet completed, would make his usual jocular attempt at blowing out the electric light, whilst he said something about 'devil take the hindmost.'

There came a tap at the other door of the bedroom. With a faint echo of a long-laid fear of 'something wrong with the children,' Mrs. Barrett fixed her pale eyes on it with a haunting ghost of anxiety, as to her timid 'Come in,' Ann England entered.

Ann had been successively 'general' in the 'semi' days, 'nurse-housemaid,' and full-fledged 'nurse.' By now she held a nondescript position. Nominally she was Mrs. Barrett's personal attendant; but 'Mamma' could never get used to personal attendance; was, in fact, timidly sensitive to having anyone in the room when she was dressing; so that whilst Ann held a position of honour in the House and drew excellent wages, she had to depend on her own ingenuity to find herself occupation. She protected her timid mistress from household 'outsiders,' patronised her master, had occasional 'scenes' with Miss Edith—who despised the feudal

system and at the same time resented familiarity from 'inferiors.' But the real object of Ann's existence was wrapt up in her intense adoration of Master Rodney.

In his childhood she had done her faithful and ignorant best to spoil him completely, had shown her teeth at necessary parental discipline on the part of her master; had bitterly resented the public school episode; had shaken her head darkly over the folly of trusting 'her boy' with 'that lot' at Cambridge.

For the rest, Ann was a little, sandy, white-eyelashed woman, curved forward as though always in the act of carrying something heavy. She wore black, with a white apron of unadorned plainness. To Edith's annoyance and Rodney's amusement, she resented a cap as 'beneath' her. It was a long while now since Mrs. Barrett had given up mildly suggesting: 'But, Ann, you know, really, caps are so very becoming.'

At Mrs. Barrett's 'Come in,' Ann entered with a heavy-footed disquiet that, after long years, still recalled the 'general' and the jerry-built 'semi.'

"I saw her," she said, without any preliminary, and rather mysteriously.

Mrs. Barrett went on with her brushing till her silently moving lips had accomplished *ninety-nine*, *a hundred*, before she answered—

"Well, Ann?"

"She's quite the lady." Ann folded her arms in unconscious but exact imitation of one of her mistress's most favoured attitudes. "Yes, she's quite the lady, is Miss Wolney."

Mrs. Barrett coloured.

"Naturally. Mr. Rodney——"

Ann puckered her mouth.

"As to that, *Master* Rodney's no wiser than the rest of them!" She was fond of belittling her god, but woe to anyone else who attempted it! "Just a pair o' eyes and a lively bit of colour, and there he is, down in the dust before them."

Mrs. Barrett coloured again.

Ann was free with her tongue. Old retainers—and that sort of thing! Still, there were limits.

"You must remember——" she began, but, too timid to speak the rebuke, she put a limp tress of her hair into her mouth—they did that in Victorian days for some long-forgotten reason—and her words died away into a mumble.

"It's getting that thin on the top, m'am. You did oughter let me brush of it for you. They say as there's virtue in brushing."

"But I do brush it, Ann; a hundred each side, night and morning."

"Well, I suppose age'll have its way with all of us if only we live long enough. Master Rodney's young lady, she've nice hair, now. I'd a good look at her; Jenkyns, him leaving the room door open by my orders, while you was having your teas; and me wondering all the time just why I didn't quite cotton to her."

"After all, Ann"—Mrs. Barrett made a grab at the unready thing she called her dignity—"after all, Ann, is it at all necessary——?"

"As how, m'am?"

"That you should—er—like Miss Wolney?"

"I don't say I don't like her, 'cos I do. That is,

I can't say as I dislike her. She's pretty an' all that. But I don't seem to see as she's the right one for Master Rodney. Do you think so yourself, m'am ? ”

Mrs. Barrett fluttered.

“ Really, Ann, we ought not to expect—— He hasn't chosen—just for our pleasure.”

“ Pleasure ! ” Ann snorted, “ who'd look for pleasure when we're bound to lose him ? 'Tisn't that. It's—well, I know him through and through, Master Rodney, and he's that sensitive—— For all her fineness, she'll jar on him, will that young woman. It's likely our fault in a way. We've made him too much of a gentleman ; too nice to stand up against coarser stuff, that's what he is. He'll be surprised at first when he gets to know her—hurt more'n a bit ; and then she'll ride over him. I can see that in her as plain as I see you and me in the glass there, opposite.”

“ Really, Ann—I think—I am sure—you are mistaken.”

“ I'm never mistaken,” she returned with gloomy confidence. “ Master Rodney's one of those as trusts the face of a coin without ever setting his teeth to it. And me waiting all these years, looking at one and another and deciding they none of them good enough. And he giving me the slip in such fashion. What does the master think of her ? ”

Mrs. Barrett looked at the dressing-room door apprehensively. The sounds of sluicing and humming were stilled ; she pictured ‘ Papa ’ in his long, old-fashioned nightshirt — ‘ Going to bed in your clothes,’ was his verdict on pyjamas—she pictured him, ponderously faithful to a lifelong habit, down

on his knees by the bedside. She glanced at the door apprehensively and lowered her voice as she answered :

“ He is pleased, very much pleased about it.”

“ Then, m’am, I can’t say as he looked it. All these years, and me not know the master ! ”

Mrs. Barrett bridled.

“ Really, Ann, you—you——” Again courage failed her.

“ Presume, was what you started to say ”—the sandy head went up defiantly. “ Well, and what if I do ? You’d get on poorly—and you know it—without me. The waste in this house ! the gossip and mischief-making ! You’d not know yourselves if I wasn’t here to look after you.”

“ Of course—I’m—quite aware——” Mrs. Barrett stammered pacifically.

“ That much for presuming,” Ann said, only half placated. “ And if—thinking as we both do about Master Rodney, me and you—we can’t speak our minds out like Christians, I don’t know the world what it’s coming to.”

The intermediate door opened cautiously, showing Mr. Barrett’s face and a modest slip of grey Jaeger dressing-gown.

“ Hallo, Ann,” he said, and was for retiring.

“ Don’t mind me, sir,” she said ; “ I was just about going. I’ve been saying that I think much as you do about this engagement.”

Mr. Barrett held the door at a decorous angle whilst his hand went up to his hair, even wetter than usual after his nightly ablutions.

“ Oh—you think with me, do you, Ann ?—I’ll be danged, though, if I know what I do think about it ! ”

"You think she ain't good enough for our Master Rodney. That's about the size of it."

"Ann—Ann——" Mrs. Barrett feebly protested.

Quite unperturbed, the little sandy woman went on addressing Jeremiah:

"You think he's made a mistake."

"Really, Ann——" Mrs. Barrett disturbed the dressing-table silver with angry, aimless movements.

"And it's up to you," Ann ended defiantly, "before it is too late, to prevent it."

With that she turned and left the room, head forward, back curved, as though she carried a heavy weight.

Jeremiah came in cautiously and stood blinking at the door whereby Ann had departed.

"She goes rather far," he said at last; "what do you think of a pension?"

"She is dreadful sometimes. But"—Mrs. Barrett's eyes filled—"I don't think, I really don't think I could do without her. She—she is so much a part of the past—the children small, you know—little Roddy with his ways—and Edith, always so clever. And the scrimping a bit, and the pleasure of making a lot out of little——" Without thinking, she swept a space clear of the silver brushes before her. She gave a sob and went on:

"Jerry dear, we must not be selfish about it, or jealous. But do you think—are you really sure—it is for his happiness?"

"That I am not," Rodney's father answered, decidedly. He felt for the familiar pockets, and failing to find them, drew up the tails of his dressing-gown over his arms, and stood before the elaborate fireplace with its burnished gas-fittings—an oddly

ridiculous figure he made—yet not altogether unlovable.

“Nay I’m not,” he went on, “and I shouldn’t be surprised if Roddy’s not, either.”

Mrs. Barrett stared at him palely.

He went on, rather defiantly :

“I haven’t lived all these years—I haven’t jostled my fellow-men, bested them, been bested, and won through—all for nothing. I haven’t read many books, I haven’t ; I’ve found something a deal more interesting—faces of men. Aye, when you know how to read them ! You mark my words, that boy of ours—he’s not happy, not as he oughter be, anyway.”

In weak natures there is always an odd tendency towards contradiction. Though, in secret, Mrs. Barrett ruled her life largely according to the dictates of her old servant Ann, though, openly, her husband was to her more than the ‘law and the prophets,’ yet, the more the two were averse to Rodney’s engagement the more she felt bound to uphold and defend it.

“It is only natural,” she said rather primly, “that Rodney should feel the weight of his new responsibilities. It is quite possible he is already troubling about the expenses of a wife and establishment.”

“I bet you he knows his old dad better than that.” It was said without his usual assurance ; he missed the familiar jangle of the coins in his pocket. “Rod knows who’ll stand by him.”

“Of course,” Mamma agreed ; “yet still, there are many things——”

“A man, right in love, don’t think, though, of

many things. He just thinks of the girl and what a deuced lucky chap he is to have got her. A bit humble and soft he may be, thinking her a dear sight too good for him. But happy ! Lord ! I remember how I fair sweated happiness——”

“ Did you, Jeremiah ? ” She was looking down at her small worn hands. She had taken off the costly rings with which her husband loved to load her, keeping only one beside her thin wedding-ring. It was nine-carat gold and there were dull turquoises and a few tarnished pearls in it. Jeremiah had slipped close behind her and now his eyes rested on it.

“ I went without my 'baccy for I don't know how long to pay for that,” he said, and his husky voice trembled. “ And when I shoved it on to your finger, no king in his palace was ever half so proud and so happy. I'd like to see our Rodney like that. But I can't see it. I said, to-night, to him, ' There's the ring, Rod, you can draw on me for that, to any reasonable figure.’

“ It was after you'd left us. He was standing on the other side of the fire, and he just looked up smiling. But his eyes weren't, as they'd oughter been, shining.

“ And he said, ' Thanks, awfully. Yes, I must see what she'd like.' Then he was thoughtful again directly. He wasn't going to get no real happiness out of that ring, not like I did, when I went all that while without my 'baccy—passing the jeweller's shop twice a day just to have a look at the one I'd chosen.

“ After a bit Rod said, without looking up, ' She said you were all awfully good to her.’

"Of course, I guessed he'd been along there to see her before he came home, and I wondered. It was a bit small of me, but I'd have liked to have known what young madam had said about us. But Rodney didn't say much. And that again wasn't right, not to my way of thinking. He did ought to have been bubbling right over. I know I was——"

"Were you, Jerry?"

He laughed, happily.

"I'll bet I was a nuisance to folks. I wouldn't have felt that way, though, with Rodney. He was too still and quiet altogether. And sudden, like it comes over you, the clock seemed to be shouting out loud, '*Mistake, 'Mistake.*' It was that plain I went hot lest Rodney heard it. He didn't. 'T all events he didn't say anything. Not then. Only presently, he brought out, as if it was a bit difficult, 'My mother, does she like her? Of course she said everything sweet to me—a daughter—and all that. But I want—very much—my mother to like her—and for Cecil to like my mother.'

"So I said something or another. I don't quite know what. I think I made that all right. I hope I did, anyhow.

"Then next, he says, 'And you, Father?' and he looks up with a smile, cock-a-hoop all of a sudden, 'I hear you think me jolly lucky.'

"'Jolly lucky!' I said it as hearty as I knew how, though all the while I wanted to lay hold of him and shout, 'Listen to the clock, man. The clock's right, all the rest's humbug!'"

He ran his hand over his hair.

"Somehow," he said, "I think I oughter 'a done it."

"Oh, no, Papa," Mrs. Barrett protested, "you could not have been so cruel."

"Cruel? I don't know about cruel. Ain't it a long sight crueller to let the lad walk into the fire with his eyes blinded? He's been let into this 'ere job, I'll take my oath on it." He brought his fist down with a bang that made the toilet-fittings jangle protestingly.

"That's what it is—he's been let into it. Young madam's a sly one, anyhow—and he can't see his way out again. Not fair and honourable he can't—and, like the gentleman he is, he's trying to put a good face on to it. But I'm not going to sit down—not me"—his voice grew harsher and louder—"not to see the lad's life spoilt for him—and me not doing nothing. I just aren't going to do it."

"But, Jeremiah—Papa—what can you do?"

"That's what I've got to think out."

He was thinking so hard that he got into bed without a thought for his little joke of the electric light, the devil and the hindmost. It had sometimes annoyed Mrs. Barrett by its vain repetition. Now she missed it.

CHAPTER XI

ANOTHER VIEW OF THE HERO

CONSCIENTIOUSLY Edith Barrett owned—to herself, naturally not to anyone else, least of all to Rodney—that she had not done her duty by Cecil. Linda Ray had interested her to the neglect of the other girl who was, of course, under the circumstances, the more important.

“I wish it could have been Linda,” she was telling herself as she was shown into Cecil’s sanctum; “that girl has some strength of character. It would be possible to develop her into something worth having. As for the other, she is, no doubt, modelled on Nature’s original idea of a woman; but Nature has advanced a long way since the era of fig leaves and aprons.”

She took a seat as far as possible from the fire and as near as might be to the window. It was only open a little way, for the day was chill and now and then a gust of rain spattered on the panes, whilst the plants in the window-box outside shivered and turned back their leaves protestingly.

Edith glanced round the room; it was too full for her taste; she would have liked to turn out two-thirds of the stuff, when the remainder might have looked well against a low-toned paper—the present one had a satin-like stripe which annoyed Edith.

There were too many flowers in the room ; besides, their sickly perfume cast doubts on the freshness of some of the water. It was all very interesting, of course, to a student of character. Edith wondered what her brother would make of it. As yet she had not seen Rodney and Cecil together ; and when she tried to picture him at his ease in this room imagination failed her. For Rodney she would have chosen a more austere setting, with a wife yielding but capable, a woman of charm, yet sensible. Because Cecil had fluffy hair and used her eyes effectively Edith had fallen into the common error of supposing that she must be empty-headed.

Edith laughed at proverbs and well-worn sayings, not knowing how at heart she accepted most of them, or she might have realised that deep waters are not necessarily still ; and the thing that glitters may possibly, after all, be eighteen-carat gold.

She had plenty of time to observe Cecil's portraits, photographs, and the 'Le Saxe' on its pedestal. The last she dismissed as vanity ; the photographs, as reflecting moods, claimed her interest ; she shook her head at the Cecil in the rose-garden ; stared a long time at Rubelow's pastel, turned away, looked again, and said, ' I wonder.'

Just then the door opened and Linda came in. She was in out-of-door things. Rain and wind had given her a delightful colour. Edith Barrett interested her ; her eyes had darkened accordingly. The little wisps of hair, which she would have disgustingly termed 'straggles,' clung in appealing soft curves to the blue-grey brim of her hat, rain-drops sparkled on them.

Edith's heart warmed towards Linda, whilst she

decided, judicially, 'She grows upon one; it is faint praise to call her pretty.'

"Cecil will be here in a minute," Linda was saying. "Isn't it raining? The taxi broke down on the other side of the Square, we had to walk, Cecil got wet, she is changing——"

Edith smiled. Her thought was, 'She is too vain to be seen in disorder.'

"Rodney's sister—he would want me to be at my best," Cecil had said. "You go in and do the polite, Linda; it doesn't matter for you. I'll rush and make myself pretty."

A service of love, in reality, and Edith set it down on the shrine of vanity!

Meanwhile she and Linda had quickly dismissed the weather with Edith's, "It is like a spoilt child, and insists on our notice."

Linda knew Edith had come to see Cecil, yet she could not rid herself of a certain sense of gratified importance. This handsome, clever woman stood in intimate relation to Rodney. Had she been plain and dull Linda would still have rejoiced in her presence.

"I have been wanting to meet you again. I have thought so much of all we talked about." It was a pity she could not see the pretty colour come and go in her cheeks as she said it, nor the dilating of her velvety pupils. "Do you know, you have made the world ever so much wider for me?"

Edith was pleased with the pleasure a teacher feels in a responsive pupil. There is vanity in it—with a grain of something bigger and better.

"Do you still think," she asked the younger girl, "that we are meant to be happy?"

Linda glowed.

"Of course we are, only happiness is a bigger thing than I thought it. I don't really think"—her expressive face paled—"that as yet I have grasped the idea of it."

"Names are, after all, nothing. What you call Happiness in my language may be spoken of as Purpose; in another's Success—or even Self-abnegation."

"I used to think," Linda went on naively, "that everything was so simple. Usually, you were happy just without thinking of it. A few people were unhappy, of course, and you were sorry for them and tried to help them. Then they got happy again. It was all so simple."

"And now——?"

"I suppose the whole world, and the God who made it, are simple to savages."

"Naturally, the more we know of a thing the more complicated it gets for us. It is so with everything. I remember when I was a child my father putting something into my hand and asking me what it was. 'A little brown seed, it's dirty.' I dropped it. 'Be careful,' he said, 'there are birds, yet unborn, who will need to rest in its branches; don't be the one to rob the birds of their tree-top.'

"I dare say I have forgotten the words—he may have expressed himself more ruggedly—but I have not forgotten the gist of the lesson. I often think of the unborn birds and the tree-top that is folded as yet in the seed."

"It must make things very interesting."

"It does."

"Only the seeds are so many. There would be

no room for all the trees, nor would there be birds for all."

"Nature, it is true, works on the simpler plan of extermination."

"Is she cruel, or wiser than we are?"

"Is it wise to sit down and watch things happen? Sometimes a sort of terror comes over me as to what may be the consequences of my work—anyone's work—suppose it should end in catastrophe."

"As Nature's does sometimes."

"It may only look so to us, whilst she sees further."

"It is all so enchantingly interesting; yet all such a muddle."

"The muddle, I suspect, is in ourselves only."

"Does everyone feel it, I wonder?"

"Of course not," Edith answered, rather contemptuously.

"How do you know?"

"You have only to look at the average life. What fills it? Eating and drinking, giving in marriage."

"We have to eat and drink," Linda stated prosaically.

"And to give in marriage?"

Linda blushed.

"I did not say so."

"But you thought it. And all *that* is right and necessary for the multitude. It is as far as they have gone at present. But some must be in advance; and at times you feel wild with people. There's Rodney, now. Sometimes I have thought that he is tremendously interested. When something has been talked about, some wrong, perhaps, or injustice, I have seen a look in his eyes. It has been like wine to me. I have thought, 'He cares! He is with us!'

Then the very next moment he is laughing, jesting, altogether conventional. Why are people constrained to be conventional ? ”

“ It may be because they are clothed as babies.”

“ You do say things with thoughts peeping out behind them.”

“ Do I ? ” Linda was pleased.

“ Is it because you are still so young ? ”

“ I am nearly twenty.”

“ Actual age has nothing to do with youngness. The most youthful person I have ever met was over eighty.”

Linda looked puzzled.

“ By youthful, do you mean childish ? ”

“ Childlike, perhaps. The word is more expressive ; though, probably, strictly speaking, the ‘ ish ’ and the ‘ like ’ denote they are one and the same. For myself, I never was childlike. I missed it, somehow. It is a pity. Your friend Cecil, she is not childlike——”

“ But you do not know her as well as I do. She is—very—sometimes.”

“ She intends to be thought so.”

“ Edith, don’t you like Cecil ? ”

She smiled. “ Supposing I do not, should I own it ? ”

“ You would,” said Linda audaciously.

Edith looked pleased.

“ I might. I think I do like her. Only—to be quite honest—I don’t want her for Rodney. I may be wrong ”—she gave the phrase its usual negative turn of assurance—“ but I can’t help thinking she will pull him down. Now, don’t be offended ”—for Linda had coloured hotly—“ when I say ‘ down,’

I mean only down to the commonplace. Can't you imagine them together, 'doing' dances, dinners, and theatres; growing every year a little more commonplace—I was going to be impertinent enough to add—and *fat*? I will add it for Rodney."

"It is certainly rather depressing."

"The pity of it is—Rodney has wings. He has not used them as yet; perhaps, now, he never will. I am afraid that Cecil will clip them. He will smile at her fondly and let her."

"I don't think you are altogether fair to Cecil."

"And you are not fair to Rodney."

Linda's lip twitched.

"How do you mean? How am I not fair?"

"Not fair to his possibilities. To you he has seemed—how shall I put it?—admirable—admirable in its original sense, as derived from the verb 'to admire.' He has seemed admirable, but only as an ordinary young man might seem admirable."

"I do not consider him ordinary." Linda's voice was stifled. The words were torn from her unwillingly; but her loyalty to Rodney compelled them. "Not at all ordinary," she added more firmly.

Edith made a movement of impatience. She did not like her choice of words questioned.

"If not ordinary, only so far as he interested you personally. You liked Rodney. First and last that sums up your point of view as regards him. Your friend Cecil likes him, too—she goes as far as you do, and no further——"

Linda flamed. As sometimes before momentarily she felt that she hated Edith Barrett.

"You are not fair to Cecil," she said again, but more coldly.

"It is she who is not fair—not fair to Rodney. Do you call it fair to capture a man and drown him in littleness?"

"Cecil has not—does not—I cannot find words, I am not clever like you—I think I am glad I am not clever. To be clever—it seems to make people hard and cruel—weighing and judging—prying into people to find their motives—*glad* to unearth a mean and sordid one——" she gave a choking sort of a sob. "I am afraid I have been very rude," she ended tamely.

"Don't apologise. I'd a great deal sooner you should speak out your mind."

"If I have a nasty, uncharitable mind, it would be better not to show it." Linda felt penitently small.

"It is only hidden things that are nasty. Perhaps I *am* hard and cruel. As a matter of fact I have thought so myself. Does it matter though? The object of my life is not that people should like me. The world's work needs hard, cruel things sometimes. It may be for hard, cruel purposes that I am needed."

"I should not like to think so." Linda warmed again to this woman who could be in a breath proud and yet selfless.

"You forget. I hold no brief for the individual."

"Then why"—Linda smiled suddenly—"how is it you are anxious about your brother's individuality?"

"A fair question. Motives are so mixed that it is difficult to sort them. Yet I think you will allow

that I was not concerning myself about Rodney's happiness. He will be happy enough with clipped wings; many insects doff theirs after their nuptials, and are no doubt much safer without them. I am not crying out for his safety *or* for his happiness. It is the things he might do that matter."

"What things?"

Edith looked into the fire without answering. The rain battered in petulant gusts at the window. From the wall the Rubelow pastel seemed to look down maliciously. Edith spoke slowly at last, her eyes still on the fire.

"Have you ever met with the term, a 'Nature's gentleman'?"

"Often." Linda's spirit had always secretly thrilled to the suggestion.

"Do you remember Dean Hole's definition?—'There is no such being as a gentleman by birth. . . . The real elements—the truthfulness which cannot lie, the uprightness which will not stoop, the courtesy which considers all, the honour which cannot be bribed, the command of the passions, the mastery of the temper—these can only be learned from God.' God's gentleman, Nature's gentleman. It is one and the same."

"He would be Super-human." Linda's voice was tense and low. All this might be very grand and fine, but her soul cried out for Rodney as she knew him, every day, human, dear for his imperfections.

"You know the highest aim," Edith said softly. " 'Be ye also perfect.' "

"But Rodney——"

"He will lose himself in a life of littleness. But

in a life of high aims there is no telling what he might achieve."

Edith's voice rang out with a sort of triumph. Linda felt very flat and far beneath ; she snatched at something nearer earth.

" But there is Cecil——"

" Cecil is pretty, sweet—a woman to be desired, but—incompatible with high aims."

" You are wrong." Linda started forward impulsively.

At that very moment Cecil opened the door of her sanctum.

CHAPTER XII

A SIDELIGHT ON THE HERO

CECIL looked angelic in a simple-seeming and elaborately costly, pale blue and soft white straight-falling thing she called a 'rest-gown.' She was a little doubtful as to how Edith would regard her prolonged absence, and she was very anxious to impress Rodney's sister with her desirability. She certainly looked more than usually charming. Wholeheartedly—she was convinced it was wholeheartedly—Linda wished Rodney were there to see Cecil.

Edith admired and at the same time felt her previous opinion further strengthened. As a matter of fact, she was sore for Rodney. Cecil was pretty, even beautiful—yet any man, almost, would do for her husband ; any, at all events, of the well-groomed, well-mannered young men that frequent London ball-rooms.

One of these—in her heart Edith despised them—would pair well with Cecil Wolney. For her brother, Edith wanted something better. Scorning, as she supposed, happiness and success, Edith was as much an individualist as anyone—only the individual of her purpose happened to be, not herself, but her brother.

So far, he had shown himself to the world amiable,

clean-living, a pleasant companion—nothing further. But Edith, his sister, saw, or read into him, possibilities. All that great and splendid she herself longed for, saw dimly, attempted to follow, though hindered as dream-feet are weighted, seemed to her not too far off nor splendid for Rodney to reach or leap up to. For him all things were possible. Then came this girl. A charming girl, well-born, good-looking, a sweet wife for someone—a tragic mistake for Rodney.

So ran Edith's thoughts ; whilst Cecil, fluttering with half-shy, half-assured beauty, was setting herself to conquer the good-will of Rodney's rather formidable sister.

" I didn't hurry," she started airily ; " I knew you would find the time fly with Linda. Isn't she a dear, this little friend of mine ? " She took Linda's hand and fondled it.

An odd little flicker of something—it could not have been a doubt as to Cecil's genuineness—yet a disturbing flicker went through Linda's mind, taking away something from her enjoyment of the caress.

" I think you are fortunate in your friend," Edith smiled, playfully for her ; yet in her tone Linda detected a touch of patronage, and hated herself because of a momentary gratification that the tone was not for herself, but Cecil.

Meanwhile, Cecil was rattling on inconsequently :

" Linda's the only decent thing I got out of my school-days. I never was the least good at lessons. The joke was, I used to be terrified when Miss Higgins said, ' What will people think when you are in " Society " and they find you do not know—— ? ' some stuffy old fact in her creed of

education. I used to fancy myself calling on a ball-room floor to swallow me because I didn't know how many wives King Edward had—or was it King Henry? So much for life through a school-mistress's spectacles. Jolly soon I found out the real thing. Most people were even more ignorant than I was—or pretended to be—which was decent of them and made us all happy. It's all stuff and nonsense about having to know things. My children, if ever I have any"—she was carelessly swinging her blue girdle—"they shan't learn a single thing till they are grown up. Then they can if they want to. That's the proper time for learning. When you are children everything's all out of proportion, anyhow; and then they make it worse with silly happenings in the thirteenth century—improper happenings, lots of them—that they wouldn't let you read about in a novel; or dry lists of the population and exports of places with unpronounceable names. As though they mattered! And they are always changing, too! Did you get any good out of your school?" she asked Edith.

The flame in Edith's cheeks flickered and deepened.

"I think our school-days—even mine, and I am older than either of you—are not far enough away yet for us to judge them fairly. At present, I own, I wonder whether we got enough good to dilute the evil?"

Cecil tossed the girdle high.

"Ours wasn't that sort," she said with assurance; "deadly, if you like; but I can tell you, painfully respectable. Though I do remember one girl getting conscientious hysteria because she had passed a note

to a schoolboy who purposely got mixed in our crocodile. You remember, Linda—that daft Florrie Kettle.”

They both laughed, and Edith in sympathy. Then she went on :

“ When I said ‘ evil,’ I meant things that have already come home to me as evil ; for instance, the slavish flattery we gave to those in authority, the deception with which we forced laughter at their unhumorous, often unkindly, jokes. Worse still, the time-serving which prompted at least quiescence during the official baiting of some unfortunate among ourselves, who had, perhaps quite innocently, fallen under displeasure of the ‘ powers.’ All these things seem to me evil—ugly at the time, more ugly in their consequences. They made us hard—some of us at all events ; they sowed the seeds of petty tyranny. Above all, they engendered the ‘ peace-at-any-price ’ principle. It is the ‘ peace-at-any-price ’ section that is the dead weight in any community. It is like the stone at a drowning dog’s neck—there’s no reaching the surface whilst that drags you down.”

“ I suppose there was—when I come to think of it I am sure there was—all that you speak of at our school,” said Linda, “ yet I never thought of it so ; I mean, not to realise the harm in it. I always, in a dim sort of way, supposed it was all for our good.”

“ Oh, but there is a lot of good at school,” Cecil put in with her usual kindly optimism. “ You are all jolly together, and get the corners knocked off, and learn to live and let live, and so on.”

“ Which is probably only another sucker of the ‘ peace-at-any-price ’ growth,” suggested Edith ; then,

her face darkening, "but the evil I particularly thought of—only just now I was cowardly enough to shirk it—was a thing that may or may not have affected others besides myself; though I cannot but think it must have been contagious, and, in all probability, I was not the originator. The worst thing that came to me when at school was this—I was ashamed of my father."

"Nonsense, you weren't, I'm quite sure of that," Cecil said hastily, whilst Linda's eyes deepened with pained unbelief.

"It seems odd now that I could have been," Edith went on quietly; "but I gather that we were influenced to consider too much the outside of things. I don't think we were snobbish about money—so far we were wholesome, or, at any rate, most of us. It was speech, manners—the veneer of civilisation. Once I remember we had 'sports' and an open-air play, the 'prize-day,' or some such function. All the parents were invited—I forget why father couldn't come, but, at the last, mother turned up without him. And I was glad! That was the dreadful thing, I was glad! I was fond of him, tremendously fond of him; yet I was glad he did not come. I *was* ashamed; it quite spoilt the day. I mean I was so ashamed to find I was ashamed of him—the father that I loved. For months, it may have been years, that fact poisoned my life. I was ashamed of father! It would not have been half so bad had I not been fond of him. And once or twice I can recall dreadful moments when he looked at me as though he knew it.

"At last I told Rodney. I don't quite know what I expected from him—scorn? rebuke? or had I a

cowardly hope, a deadly fear, that he would think as I did?

"I can see him now. We were playing tennis and had come together at the net for the ball. I don't know what made me speak. The net was between us. He was in the weedy stage and breaking his voice; his open flannel shirt showed his stringy, boyish neck. It was then I seemed able, and I told him. He looked at me puzzled, yet in a way understanding. At last he said, 'Poor Edie, how dreadful for you!' Then he drew a long breath and said, 'and father is so splendid!' That was about the time when we had rebelled against 'Mamma' and 'Papa,' and I thought how manly 'father' sounded as Rodney said it.

" 'I know,' I agreed, 'of course he is splendid. And that only makes it harder.'

" 'Look here,' he said over the top of the net and playing with the ball on his racket, I can remember the strong look of his mouth and the way his eyes were shining, 'tell me straight, what do you want altered? Would you like him to speak differently?'

"I shook my head, dumbly; father, without his big, rough-sounding voice, wouldn't be father.

" 'Is it how he dresses?' Rodney demanded.

"No. I couldn't imagine him clothed differently. Besides, at that stage, I considered clothes beneath consideration.

" 'I don't know what it is,' I burst out, 'I only know it is there.'

" 'Don't you think'—he flushed and examined the ball in his hand minutely—'that souls can suffer from a sort of short-sightedness. Fellows I know have to wear spectacles because without them

everything is dim. Don't you think it is short-sighted not to be able to look beyond people's outsides, little mannerisms and so on, at the self that is them really? I don't know how to say it, but I know a few things about him, and if you knew father really, instead of being ashamed you'd just glory in belonging to him.'

"It wasn't easy, it couldn't have been, for a boy to speak so; and from that time I began to see, dimly, that Rodney had possibilities."

"And you and your father?" Cecil suggested.

"Rodney was quite right. It was not long before I learned to glory in him."

"That was splendid!" Cecil said with sympathetic readiness, yet at heart she hardly believed it.

The confession, not an easy one, struck Linda as made with a purpose. A wave of admiration swept over her. It must be grand to be so large-minded as Edith. Yet all the while, in the back of her mind, a bright possession to take aside and gloat over presently, was the picture of a slim boy with a tennis racket and open shirt-collar, a boy with honest grey eyes, who broke through his reserve to vindicate the father he loved and was proud of. The boy who helped and did not condemn his sister.

It was all so like Rodney.

CHAPTER XIII

THE HERO ABSENTS HIMSELF

It was later on the same day that Cecil broke in on Linda.

"Talk about Job's patience," she cried out angrily.

"What's up now?" Linda was at the side table writing a home letter. She wrote very good letters. Aunt Emma favoured her friends with extracts and told them all how she 'read between the lines' that her 'child' was tremendously happy.

"What is up now?" Linda was only mildly interested. Cecil's mole-hills were only mole-hills, and usually small ones at that.

"Of all the nuisances"—Cecil was pushing things about irritably—"I do declare. What's the good of being engaged? People *will* think—— Well, it's his own look out—I don't care what they say." She went to the glass and impatiently fingered and patted her hair. "I'm just in the mood to throw the whole thing over. I'd as soon as not, anyway."

"But, Cecil, you haven't told me—has anything happened?"

"Has anything happened? I like that. You don't suppose I'd be *mad*. I *am* mad, I can tell you—all about nothing." She was breathing fast, her mouth had a dangerous quiver.

Linda got up.

"Cecil, dear——"

"For goodness' sake, don't touch me. If you do, I shall go stark, staring."

Linda stood still, her arms limply hanging.

"Are you going to tell me?"

"Of course I am—if you won't keep on interrupting."

"Cecil—you—you haven't quarrelled with Rodney?"

"Of course not, stupid."

"I thought he was staying for dinner?"

"That makes it worse. Mother *will* be vexed. She hates her table thrown out. And I particularly wanted the Maintons to meet him. Adèle was so beastly set-up over her engagement, and Rodney—I will say that for him—looks glorious in evening clothes. I'd have given I don't know what for this not to have happened."

"I still don't know what it is that has happened."

"Rodney has gone away. For a week, or even a fortnight—gone up to Scotland—a silly old Town Hall, or something. His firm want him to compete, or something. I laughed when he talked about a 'competition.' It sounds like 'Answers' or the 'Corner' in a Lady's Paper. But he took it all seriously, looked quite huffed, and said it might 'make' him. I was pretty wild with him. And then he said I didn't understand—they always say that when they want to squash you.

"So I told him I understood enough to know that he was going to do me out of the first few weeks of our engagement, and a lot like that. I expect I was horrid. He went white. I was afraid of him, but

I wasn't going to let him see it, though I loved him all the more because he'd made me afraid. So I just said quietly that, after all, it might be a good thing he was going, and seeing he meant to catch the night-mail, no doubt he had plenty to do, so I wouldn't keep him."

"Cecil, how could you?"

"I'm a beast when I lose my temper. You ought to know that by this time. I wish he'd lost his. But he wouldn't."

"How did it end?"

"Tamely enough. Promising to write, and all that." She threw back her head with a glint in her eyes. "In the end we parted as usual." She gave a little low laugh. "Men are fools, aren't they, to let us find out how easy it is to hurt and to heal them?"

"Is it?" Linda said shortly. Her heart beat angrily. It was all so hard. Bad enough for her, even though Cecil were devotedly good to Rodney. But that Cecil should use her power to hurt him! And far back, somewhere, was the insistent prick of the thought that Rodney had gone. She would not see him that night, nor the morrow, nor for many days after. She was hurt all over, and so she blurted abruptly:

"Is it?"

"Is it what?"

"So easy—I mean, to heal them?"

Cecil gave the daintiest shrug of her shoulders and laughed rather consciously, then threw herself down on the sofa as she said:

"I can't altogether understand Rodney."

"Did you expect to?"

"Why yes ; I thought he was about as plain and to pattern as they make 'em. I didn't want anything weird and Ibsen-like in *my* engagement. It was mostly because he was always so easy and ready to play up to me that I chose him. He changed, though, directly after I accepted him. And now, really, I don't know what has come over him." She swung one leg, carelessly. Then looked up and stated with an air of having discovered a world-secret :

"I believe it's a mistake to know much about anybody. Everyone's nicer the less you know of them. Like shops—the most exciting things always *are* in the window. I do wish I hadn't got engaged to Rodney. It would have been ever so much nicer to have kept him off and on, indefinitely."

Linda turned away. Something seemed pulling at her heart. Perhaps Cecil was right in the odd conclusions she jumped to. Perhaps a friend, like a gift-horse, should not be examined too closely.

"Would that have been quite fair to Rodney ? " As she asked it, her voice was stifled.

"Fair ? " Cecil retorted. "Is it fair that he should go off and leave me ? "

"Can't you see—a man does not throw up his profession because he is engaged to be married ? "

"Rodney might," Cecil returned petulantly. "It does not matter to him. His father's got plenty of money."

"He wouldn't live on his father. Besides, he's keen on his work. This 'competition'—I expect it

will be a great thing. He is, no doubt, eager to win it."

"But, of course, he won't. No one who belongs to you ever wins things, do they?"

"If he did you would be tremendously proud of him."

"Of course, I'd like to see his name and those uncomfortable things architects draw in the papers. But more than that, I want *him*. You don't know what it is yet, Linda. When you love a man you want him all the time, absurdly, idiotically, madly—all the time you want him."

Linda put down the paper-knife she was holding; it showed that her hand was trembling; she felt a sick shame that it trembled.

"Yes!" she said dully.

"Well, there it is." Cecil stretched, yawning. The crackling flame of her anger had burnt itself out quickly. "Rodney's gone, and I've got to make the best of it."

She tapped an impatient foot. "Dinner tonight will be simply appalling; I know Dad will try and be funny. I shall take the line of tremendous interest in Rodney's profession. Don't know anything about it; but that won't matter. You'll back me up? You're a splendid old pal, Linda. 'True as steel,' Rodney once called you."

"Did he? When was it?"

"My dear child, how can I tell? I know he did though. He thinks a lot of you; he doesn't say it just to please me. You know, though he's not a bit clever, Rodney has an understanding way of summing up people. I'd take his opinion of

anyone but his own family. *There*, he is oddly prejudiced."

"Why 'oddly'?"

"Because, as a rule, you see the people of your own household with the gilt off."

"Perhaps the Barrett gilt does not come off."

"They make common metal take its place by help of Brassyshine," laughed Cecil. She was completely good-tempered again. She took a cigarette from a silver box on the table.

"Help yourself," she said as she lit up. After a few contented puffs, she remarked, "It's a bit of a bore, to-morrow."

"The dance at the Westons'? Can't we get out of it?"

Cecil knocked the ash off her cigarette.

"The bother is, they've given it on purpose for me. And old Weston, being Rodney's chief, I suppose it wouldn't do to offend them."

"What sort of people are they?"

"Quite all right. Friends of ours know them. It isn't anything like that. Only I do not want to go without Rodney. Friends of his there he wanted me to meet. Things do happen beastly in this silly old world."

"We'll have to go, then?"

In spite, or perhaps because of her hidden sorrow, Linda found herself anxious to go. She loved dancing; besides, she knew Edith would be there. Just now Edith occupied a very important place in Linda's thoughts, and not only because she happened to be Rodney's sister.

"Yes, I suppose we'll have to go," sighed Cecil, "that is, if Madame Courie does not disappoint me."

I positively refuse to go in any grubby old thing I've worn before. What are you wearing? "

" The grey ninon You told me to save it for something special."

" I know, a sweet little thing," Cecil said absent-mindedly.

CHAPTER XIV

THE HERO AND HIS FRIENDS

It was quite the gayest thing Linda had ever seen or imagined. So much light, so much colour ; yet so well-balanced that there was not too much of either. The scent of flowers seemed to swirl with the music and the radiantly dressed, bright-eyed people. The scent of flowers and the glitter of eyes, passing, passing—those would be the keynote in the remembrance of the Weston dance for Linda, always. The people were all strange to her excepting Edith Barrett. Edith, in coppery satin with roses of the same colour, Linda thought quite the most beautiful woman there ; and expected from her no more than a glance and a smile in passing.

Linda had plenty of partners ; the Weston affairs were always well stage-managed, and she had by now taken part in enough gay functions to feel at home in the odd whirligig that brings two atoms into momentary contact, only to separate them again relentlessly. It was great sport, being whirled round now with this and now with that atom.

Two of the atoms were to Linda more interesting than the others for the simple reason that she had found out they were intimate friends of Rodney's.

Montague Craig, familiarly addressed as ' Monty ' by other white-shirted atoms, was tall, dark, distinguished-looking ; nevertheless, Linda would have found him disappointingly commonplace had it not been for the fact that he not only knew Rodney but had been with him at Cambridge.

" He's the sort of chap you don't get sick of on board a yacht. Good test, isn't it ? "

Montague Craig was extremely wealthy, Linda gathered ; but she was more interested in the facts that he danced really well and that he was evidently fond of Rodney.

The name of the other particular atom was Bob—and something else, on her programme, that began with an H and ended in a tail. It might have been Harvey or Harding. Bob was a little sleek man with very fair hair and eyelashes, and the expression of an intelligent guinea-pig. He would have been an excellent dancer had he not been short-winded ; it annoyed Linda to feel his panting breaths in her ear, yet she could forgive him even that on account of the very warm corner his heart most evidently held for Rodney.

" Good sort, old Roddy. Know him well ? "

" Oh, yes. My greatest friend is the girl he is engaged to."

" Where did he meet her ? "

" In Town, I think."

" Wasn't it Cornwall ? "

Linda blushed. That Bob would not see, because they were whirling round and everything was blurred into great scented waves of circling colour.

" No, I don't think so. At least I am sure not," she answered.

"Good sort, is she? Sorry. Friend of yours. Must be."

Linda laughed. The music had ended. Lights and colours no longer whirled round them, but twinkled and steadied as they moved with the stream into the cooler air of the lounge hall.

"Goes deep with old Rod," Bob remarked. "Takes it seriously."

"Wouldn't you?"

The small guinea-pig face looked startled.

"Dream sometimes I am. Wake up. Thankful."

"You are not very complimentary."

"When I meet jolly girl, take rest. Big strain, compliments."

"There is no need to pay them."

"They expect it."

"And you don't see the remedy?"

"Choke 'em off—what?"

"Get engaged to a girl, of course, then you'll have no further trouble with the rest."

"How about the one?" Bob looked comically distressed.

At that moment Cecil sailed past, chattering to Montague Craig.

"That," said Linda, "is Cecil Wolney."

"Jove! why didn't you tell me?"

Linda laughed.

"I have just told you."

"Didn't give me time. Top-hole anyway!"

On the whole Linda was satisfied with the impression Cecil had made, looking radiantly fair by the side of her dark, handsome partner. Her 'little French thing' in mauve and silver showed her willowy grace to perfection. It struck Linda,

with a little pang of jealousy, that Cecil did not seem to be missing Rodney ; but, of course, it was Cecil's way to flirt with every man she danced with ; besides, a girl has to hide her feelings.

Presently Monty Craig and Bob—his name was neither Harvey nor Harding, but Hendrey—cast anchor at the same moment in the refreshment room.

"Decent do," Bob opined across a frothing tumbler.

"Jolly decent ; yes, tip-top band and ripping girls. Old Weston knows how to do it, doesn't he ? "

"Rather. Pity old Rod's not here. Clever fellow, Roddy ; 'll leave us all behind——"

He broke off to gaze in silent admiration, as with a coppery gleam and a scent of tea-roses Edith Barrett swept by.

Monty looked after her critically.

"Handsome woman. Know who she is ? "

With difficulty Bob withdrew his eyes from the vanishing vision.

"That, why—Rod's sister, of course."

"Not the Suffragette sister ? "

"Suffragette be hanged ! " Bob exploded.

"Too handsome and too well-dressed," laughed Monty. "You are sure, are you, it is his sister ? "

"'Course, know her quite well, met her at Roddy's."

"Ever met the old Brassie ? Awful, I suppose, isn't he ? "

"Known worse. Rod thinks everything of him." Monty smiled.

"I suppose—a rough diamond."

"Don't know 'bout diamonds. Never had any use for 'em."

Monty laughed.

"Wait till you meet the woman to wear them."

"*She'd* look well in 'em." Bob cast an expressive glance at the place Edith Barrett had made radiant in passing. Then he screwed up his comical small face rather ruefully, opened his mouth and said nothing.

Monty thrust his hands in his pockets.

"As far as I am concerned," he stated, "paste is every bit as pretty as diamonds and you don't have to bother about losing it."

Just then Cecil went past. Like black and white moths round an azalea, men clustered and followed. Monty and Bob both turned to look after her.

Said the former, quietly :

"That's more in my style than the other. There's not a girl here to hold a candle to her."

"Right enough. Give me Edith Barrett for a woman."

"A bit hard for my taste. Besides, I shy at the Suffragette suggestion. No, if I were thinking of giving up my liberty, which, while Providence leaves me my intelligence, I have no intention of doing, I'd take the girl with the hair and the colour ; roses aren't in it, anyway. Didn't catch her name. Got her down as silver and helio. Do you go by colour ? "

"Programme ? No—ears, feet, nose, anything that strikes me."

"Must read a bit ogreish."

"No matter. Always burn 'em."

"I keep mine. Some day, when I'm old and

bald-headed, I shall turn them out and regale myself on memories."

His eyes were still fixed on Cecil. She was standing with her back to a mirror, which gave the odd but pretty suggestion that she was childishly measuring her height with another. All the while she was alert with small movements. Her eyes and her lips were busy.

Bob's eyes had followed Monty's.

"Poor old Rod," he said shortly.

"Why this sudden sympathy? What has Roddy done to deserve it?"

Bob nodded his head towards the group at the mirror.

"Don't seem any room for him."

Montague paled and stiffened.

"You don't mean, you are not telling me, that that's——"

"Rod's girl." Bob nodded.

Monty tried a laugh. It did not come off very well.

"Lucky beast," he said shortly. He had looked away from Cecil.

"Some like that sort of thing," Bob sputtered; "'spose it flatters 'em. I'd like my girl to myself, thank you."

"You might be a beastly old Pasha." Monty kept his eyes from looking at Cecil, though a half-glance still showed him the back of her head in the mirror. The way her hair sprung from the neck was maddening. The realisation of its impossibility had lit smouldering attraction into leaping admiration. It was just his luck, he told himself moodily. So far, he had always been able to

have all he wanted and, in consequence, had never really wanted anything. And now, something he greatly wanted had been dangled before his eyes, only to be snatched away again, out of his reach. Rodney Barrett was a capital sort ; but there was nothing particular about him—looks or money or anything. His people were more or less unrepresentable. And here he had romped in straight away, a winner !

“ See you again,” Bob was saying. “ This is Miss Barrett’s.”

His pale little eyes looked eager.

It was not till the faint light of dawn was beginning to steal in at the windows that Linda got a few precious moments with Edith Barrett. Even that was more than she had expected. Edith did not dance all the time ; though in great request as a dancer, she was often to be seen, quite regardless of the movement and noise about her, talking to some absorbed-looking man, or with a group of earnest women, some of whose plainly dressed heads rose rather oddly above their bare shoulders, as though it was only by inadvertence that they had been dressed at all for the evening. And always hovering somewhere near was a light-haired little man with the face of an intelligent guinea-pig.

For the last half-hour the room had been perceptibly thinning. Now and again, with a sighing sound, petals fell from the massed flowers that were weary and wilting. The shoe of Linda’s partner had met with an accident. She was not sorry for a few unoccupied moments in which to look about her. In spite of the sense of loss and depression

that came over her occasionally, she could not but own that she had been enjoying herself. It was a great comfort to know that, even when you had no hope of the best thing in life, it was not all emptiness; people had not ceased to be interesting, rather they had become more so. More than ever before, Linda felt herself one of them. All, or nearly all, looked bright and happy. Perhaps they were thinking the same thing of her. Yet there must be among them, sorrow, anxiety, trouble of all sorts. It was an exciting thought, giving a warm sense of being bound to the rest by a bond of sympathy.

Finding Linda alone, Edith did not hesitate to dismiss her partner and sink with a sigh of relief into a neighbouring chair.

"Was he very heavy?" Linda asked with laughing sympathy.

"I've known worse; but I wanted to talk to you."

"How 'dear' of you."

Edith smiled.

"Don't let's waste time patting one another."

"Don't you like being patted? I do."

"I want to talk; and your partner may be back any minute."

"Can they put a heel on a shoe in a minute?"

"I expect he'll borrow another."

"If he is too quick I can send him away."

"You won't. You'll want to finish the dance."

"Not if I can have you to talk to."

"*Please*, no patting. And I really want to ask you something—not out of vulgar curiosity. Was Cecil vexed at Rodney's rushing off like that?"

Myself, I hardly know what to think about it. Mother said it was hardly 'the thing' on his part. I ask Mother sometimes what 'the thing' is which she so evidently worships, then she tells me not to 'try' and be clever. I feel so small. Father seemed pleased, though, about it. He backed Rodney's going. I must say I felt sorry for Cecil. An engaged girl naturally expects some attention at the first, at all events. And to-night—without him. I did not think she would come."

"She did not want to. There's no harm in telling you she really *was* angry."

"I am rather glad she was," commented Edith.

"Because it shows she—cares?"

"It might only show wounded vanity. Not but what I think she does care. Only I don't want her to be too yielding with Rodney."

"She ought to yield in an important matter like this."

"Because she ought to do a thing," stated Edith, "it does not follow that it is better for him that she should do it."

"That sounds complicated."

"My dear child, don't you know that the apparently complicated things are really the simplest?"

"Only when you've found the solution."

"That goes without saying."

"Supposing, though, you do not find it."

"Then someone enlightens you and that simplifies everything."

"How does it apply?"

"To Rodney or to Cecil?" asked Edith.

"To both of them."

"It is fatal in either case, should they conclude things are simple."

"I used to think"—Linda's eyes had saddened—"that Love would simplify everything. You had only to love a person and just go straight on loving."

"That would be existing, not living."

Linda sighed.

"Why can't we only exist?"

"Would you be content to be a cabbage, or even the slug that feeds on it? You don't suppose God made us in His own Image just to eat holes in cabbages?"

"Some hold," Linda said softly, "that not only man but every created thing bears the stamp of His Divinity."

"'Raise the stone,'" quoted Edith, "'and there thou shalt find Me; cleave the wood, and there am I.' To the wood, to the stone, He gives of Himself; but that does not say that He desires no more of mind and spirit than He does of stone or wood. It is not for nothing that we feel urged, compelled, flogged on to greater efforts, higher heights. Once press forward and there is no going back. Once it might have been possible for life to have remained simple for you; only because you would have been blind. But now your eyes are opened, already you have raised the stone, have cleaved the wood; you have no choice now but to take your share of the burden."

Linda thrilled as to a trumpet call; yet was able to thrust the thoughts of herself, her own life on one side, while she asked:

"But what has this to do with Cecil—and your brother?"

"Because," Edith answered deliberately, "I believe you are destined to influence both of them. You are Cecil's great friend, she looks up to you——"

"No, indeed. Always it has been the other way about."

"You have both thought so. But it has been only in outward seeming. And now more and more she will take her line from you. Don't yield to her, Linda. It is at your peril you yield an inch."

"Why *my* peril?"

"Because, if you yield, you drag her down instead of drawing her up. Our influence, has it ever struck you, must draw others up or drag them down, continually. The responsibility is awful——"

"I daren't think of it so," Linda said in a low voice. "I should be afraid—afraid lest something should break. Yet it is an enthralling idea. I would like to exchange my own for it."

"What is yours?"

"Only that the world is thick with cobwebs, hanging in space, grey and drifting. They hide us one from the other."

"Perhaps, if we saw more clearly, they would be cords, binding."

"They might." Linda looked wistful. "I often think," she said, starting off at a tangent, "people like Cecil have the best of it. They just go on, saying and doing whatever occurs to them; they are always happy, and everybody likes them."

"Some people do right by instinct. But I would rather do right, painfully, for the sake of the right."

"Why—I wonder?"

"Because it implies effort. Effort cleanses as well as strengthens. When we were children we had daily marks for good conduct. It was all so easy to Rodney that he was quite annoyed if he had anything less than 'Excellent.' I would wage a long day's battle for merely 'Good.'"

"That seems to prove my point. It is better to take things easily. Rodney attained more with less trouble."

"That covers the easiest of life's pitfalls. To attain without trouble has wrecked more lives than half the recognised and tabulated vices."

"You value the need for fighting?"

"Moral battles—yes."

"And how am I to help Cecil and—Rodney?"

"By preventing them from attaining too easily."

"You are cryptic."

"Yet I believe you know what I mean."

Linda thought a minute.

"Perhaps I do, only I cannot explain it."

"Neither can I explain it," said Edith.

CHAPTER XV

THE HERO IS DISCUSSED

THE Wolneys called on the Baretts.

"Thank Heaven, they were out," Mrs. Wolney stated on her return.

"Better beard lions in their den, than receive them in your own sheepfold," Mr. Wolney suggested.

"But the Baretts are by no means lions," she objected. "Lions are nice things, they do parlour tricks, and never pick their teeth in public. I am really afraid of these Baretts."

"You afraid? Tell me another."

"I *am* though—afraid of their influence with Cecil."

He cast jesting aside. "I think our little girl is too well-bred, to say nothing of her up-bringing."

"Not that." Mrs. Wolney answered his meaning rather than his words. "I am afraid of the contrast. She will get to think too much of herself. I have moments of doubt, when I fancy we have spoilt Cecil."

He laughed easily.

"That won't wash. Would she be such a favourite——?"

Mrs. Wolney shrugged her shoulders. She was

still a pretty woman, a sort of photogravure replica of the artist's proof etching that was her daughter.

"For the matter of that, *every one* spoils Cecil."

He laughed again.

"Then we need not take the burden on our shoulders. What are we among so many?"

"*They* have no responsibility."

"Responsibility be—shirked, evaded; Cecil's a good girl, and pretty—favourite with all sorts. I don't see what more you want of her."

"I don't myself, exactly." Mrs. Wolney's voice lacked assurance. Then she said, more decidedly, "While we are on the subject"—which, of course, they were, mentally—"I'd like to know just what you think of young Barrett—Rodney I ought to call him. I can't get into it, somehow. It seems to me he ought to be Philip. There's something strong and a little devil-me-care about 'Rodney.' Now 'Philip' sounds gentle, well-mannered, and amiable. That is about all you can say of young Barrett."

"You think Cecil should not have chosen a Philip?"

"I had always intended a strong type of man for her. What do you think of him?"

Her husband ruminated a moment before he answered.

"He knows a decent cigar when it's offered him, and can play a good game of billiards."

"My dear—for a son-in-law!"

"I don't see I'm so far out of it. The former proves him a man of the world; the latter—a straight eye's not to be despised, anyhow, nor the power of keeping your temper."

Mrs. Wolney sighed.

"I suppose he is very fond of her."

"That certainly seems a very good reason why he should choose her."

Mrs. Wolney coloured.

"One may suppose — after Cambridge — he'd hardly want one of their set."

"My dear, it isn't like you to be snobbish. As for that, a lot of people seem to know them. The mother is said to be of quite a good family."

"I own it might have been worse" — this rather petulantly; "a 'Varsity man is something, at all events."

"A snob, that's what you are, and you can't deny it!" he told her good-naturedly.

"So is everyone, for that matter," she returned with equal good humour. "A very good thing too, or what would become of class distinctions?"

"We might possibly get on without them."

"I hate fruit salads, mixed grills, and all kinds of things jumbled together. And we couldn't get on with no one to despise and no one to envy. I don't deny I would have liked Cecil to marry—say an Honourable——"

"With a distant chance of a peerage!"

"Not too distant a chance. I suppose we worldly mothers all see a phantom coronet hovering over the cradle of our girl-babies." She sighed and threw out her hands. "We always said, though, we would not interfere, and we haven't. It is a comfort to know he is fond of her."

"And she of him?"

Mrs. Wolney coloured, quite prettily.

"Girls don't tell these things to their mothers."

At that Mr. Wolney dropped his air of a jester. He looked solemn and tender. He held out his arms to his wife, a moment he looked into her eyes, then he bent down and kissed her.

CHAPTER XVI

THE FATHER OF THE HERO

As regards the return call of the Baretts, Mrs. Wolney's prayer of faith was granted ; she was out. It fell to Linda to support Cecil in the big grey and pale rose drawing-room, which, by the way, Jeremiah Barrett considered a washed-out affair and not a patch on the blue-rep Victorian triumph at home.

Cecil, if not exactly nervous, was ' jumpy.' She was glad her own people were out, she did not want them to meet Rodney's more than was inevitable ; but she felt at heart she would be thankful when the next half-hour was safely over.

Against the grey walls and unencumbered spaciousness of her home-surroundings, old Brassy-shine looked even more vulgar than she had pictured him. At the same time, she was conscious that had Jeremiah been on the stage, or in a book, it was quite possible she would have loved him. It was the thought of belonging to him, of him as part of her intimate belongings, that scared her. Did you have to kiss your father-in-law ? she wondered. The thought was a nightmare !

To begin with, he put his hat under his chair ! Cecil greeted him prettily, fussed a little over him,

and left him to Linda, comforting herself with the thought that Mrs. Barrett, though the very last thing in boredom, was comparatively harmless. Her voice, at all events, was not rasping, though there were times when Cecil could have shaken her for her plaintive gentleness.

They talked *Hats*, and *Sale Bargains*; *Italy*—neither had been there; *Servants*—things of whose existence beyond the flutter of white caps and aprons Cecil was hardly aware; *Theatres*—Mrs. Barrett thought Music Halls rather wicked. They also touched, in a *Daily Mail* sort of way, on the world's doings. Mrs. Barrett, struck by Cecil's intelligence—which was really tact, a much more valuable attribute—began to consider herself fortunate in her future daughter.

As for old Barrett, he started conversation with Linda in a most embarrassing fashion by the thrust direct of

“Well, young lady, and what have you got to say for yourself?”

Linda thought her own rejoinder neat.

“That depends on how far you are interested.”

He settled himself comfortably into his chair. It didn't matter at all to Linda that his hat was under it. There was a touch of pleasant and expectant humour about his mouth, as he answered:

“I am interested in everything and everybody. As a matter of fact, if I was to live two hundred, five hundred, years I'd be as interested at the end as at the beginning. There's not a word spoken, there's nothing, not even”—his eyes twinkled—“a bit of fluff that works up off the carpet, but what finds me profoundly interested, sets me thinking.”

Linda laughed. "Am I to infer that you class me with fluff off carpets?"

"Not at all. You slipped my meaning. I don't say equally interesting, but *all* interesting. Some ways are jog-trot, some adventurous, some full of beauty. They have one thing in common, they all lead somewhere."

"Do you value them on that count, or for their intrinsic interest?"

"For both. A young lady like you, now; I take pleasure in your eyes and your frock. I've seen flowers just that colour, and found it in the broken pools of a trout river. Then I value your youth and your kindness in giving some of your time to a funny fat old fellow who hasn't had the education of the people you are used to. But it is the unknown that excites me. Where may the thoughts I get from you lead me? What influence will you have on me and those I care for?"

It was a queer thing. Rodney and his father were utterly different in appearance, voice, and manner; and yet, whilst the old man was speaking, in a way Linda felt Rodney's presence, as though he were standing quite near and smiling. She felt drawn towards Rodney's father.

The babble from the other two was unceasing: Mrs. Barrett's slow snipped-off phrases, Cecil's careless rise and fall of voice, and her laughter.

Jeremiah leant forward a little; words were coming, and an introductory smile twitched at his mouth.

Suddenly Linda grasped at the likeness. The old man smiled just as Rodney smiled. She began to take pleasure in being near him.

"Now I want to know"—he was saying ponderously—"what young madam thought of her sweetheart bolting away to Scotland?"

Linda felt herself checked. Colouring vividly, she answered :

"Had you not better ask that of Cecil?"

"But I want an answer," he returned naively. "She'd put me off somehow with a laugh and a look. You know she would."

"Would she not be wise?"

"Wise? Young things are not wise; not after they've learned our language. Not wise but, as all weak things are, they are cunning."

"Why should you expect me to be any wiser than Cecil?"

"I don't," he said bluntly. "I expect you to be truthful."

"Is truth not wisdom?"

"Only in a way that young eyes are too far-sighted to fathom."

"Oh, but you must veil it, veil it with chiffon. If you'd let me, I could show you in a moment," Cecil's voice broke in with ringing clarity.

"Fripperies!" Jeremiah gave a nod and smile towards the others. "I don't doubt young madam has extravagant notions. But if it's anything the wife wants, or she wants herself, for that matter, when the time comes"—he jingled the coins in his pocket—"well, I can pay for it. You can make your mind easy on that point, young lady."

At the words and action a barrier seemed to leap

up between him and Linda ; but the unseen presence of Rodney was on her side of the barrier. There must be times when he found his father trying and—it was no good mincing words—vulgar. Why didn't Rodney tell him not to wet his hair, jingle his coins, and call people 'young lady' ?

But the very next moment Jeremiah seemed to peer wistfully over the barrier.

"I'm blunt and plain," he stated ; "but it's Rodney's happiness I'm thinking of. He's a right good lad, and I want him to be happy."

"Your daughter Edith thinks we ought not to aim at individual happiness."

He smiled sunnily.

"She's a lot younger than me, is Edith. When she comes to my time of life she'll be jolly glad, looking back, to think she's made a one or two, here and there, a bit happier. She'll be glad, too, to know as she's been happy herself when she'd the chance of it. In her own way, Edith is right down happy."

"You think, as I do—we have a right to happiness ? "

He pulled at one of his wet, grey locks.

"Can't say about 'right.' When a man goes for his 'rights,' he generally comes up against his 'wrongs.' I do know this—there's nothing one half so comfortable as happiness."

"Your own, or other people's ? "

"My own first and the rest a good second."

"Ought it not to be the other way round ? "

"I'm not talking about what *ought*, but what *is*."

"And you"—she asked, wistfully—"you really are happy?" It seemed marvellous to think you might be fat, and bald, and old, and yet happy.

"Happy? 'Course I am, and Mamma there—and, as I said, Edith. And I don't mean to stand by"—his tone and air were pugnacious—"and see Roddy anything else but happy."

"But—can you ensure it? I mean, everyone wants their sons and daughters and—everybody to be happy; yet—think of all the misery!"

Jeremiah set his jaw and thrust his hands more deeply into his pockets.

"Weakness, all of it. If you're only strong enough, you can make sure of it for yourself and your children."

At that moment old Barett's weakness was clear to Linda, and she loved him for it.

He smiled, and the tension was relaxed.

"Young lady! See here, you've been wandering me, like the man with the white elephant. Now I'm big and fat, but I'm not quite an elephant, and I object to be wandered. So now, please, you'll just tell me all about Miss Cecil and Master Rodney." He dropped his voice confidentially as he added, "It's very important to me, this is."

"I think," Linda began, "I know," she amended—she had a feeling that nothing but the exact truth would satisfy Rodney's father—"I know she was angry at first, but it soon passed. They parted as friends and——"

"They parted friends, did they?"

Old Barett did not seem so pleased as he ought to have been at the assurance. And suddenly the

stupendous idea dawned upon Linda that he did not particularly want Cecil for Rodney; was, perhaps, blind enough to doubt that Cecil would make his son happy. She lifted her eyes, they expressed incredulity.

"Yes," said Jeremiah, "that's just about the long and short of it."

"What is?"

"What you think."

Linda dropped her eyes. Her heart beat a little more quickly. The thing seemed almost uncanny.

The old man leant forward, grasping the arms of his chair. The fragile Sheraton protested.

"You are quite right," he said in a burring whisper, "I don't. A fair-weather wife is that sort. Roddy needs something with a bit of grit in her, chance a storm comes."

"But I thought"—Linda lifted her eyes defiantly—"your son was to have nothing but happiness?"

"Aye, lass!"—he threw himself back, his face grown dull and heavy—"aye! that is, if I had the ordering of it. But there"—he thrust out a gnarled, splay-fingered hand—"there *is* happiness to be gleaned after sorrow. And thank the Lord for it. What says the Marriage Service?—'For richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part'—till death us do part—and then not for long," he added, looking across at his wife, who was talking to Cecil with an anæmic kind of animation. Linda's eyes followed his. Mrs. Barrett's clothes were handsome, but all 'wrong.' A little futile, commonplace woman she

was, yet, as he gazed at her, old Jeremiah's bright eyes misted.

"That's the sort," he said, "that's the test. Poverty and struggle; children; pinching here, managing there; and always a cheery smile and a hand to help, however weary it might be. When you come to think of it, I'm like to be hard to satisfy for Rodney."

Linda felt her eyes fill.

"All the same," she said, "I do believe you are wrong. You cannot really know anyone till they are tried. I am quite sure that there is more, far more, in Cecil than you give her credit for."

"Yes, kind but firm. You *have* to be firm with servants."

The flying vision of black with white apron strings had no attraction for Cecil, but on the subject Mrs. Barrett was plaintively prolix.

"That is possible," Jeremiah said moodily; "but supposing the trial came too late and didn't turn out well. How about Rodney?"

Yes, how about Rodney, then? The question echoed hollowly in Linda's heart. How about Rodney? She pulled herself together, snapped out 'jealous!' to her inner self, and aloud:

"If trials do come, I rather think you will be surprised in Cecil."

"I trust so; we must trust so, dear young lady; and yet——"

Just then Cecil appealed to Linda for the forgotten name of some obscure milliner.

"Anything, anything," as she said afterwards, feverishly, "to deliver me from that concentrated essence of boredom, *Mamma* Barrett. The old man's pretty awful, but, at least, he is a *man*. It was too bad of you, Linda, to monopolise him."

CHAPTER XVII

QUESTIONS THE HERO'S CHOICE

EDITH and her father had a habit of talking cosily together after 'Mamma' had 'retired to rest.'

The days were far off, pale as a dream in recollection, when, long after midnight, 'Mamma' had sat close under a gas-light, patching small clothes, or casting up household accounts with a view to determine the accuracy of each highly important half-penny. Mrs. Barrett enjoyed—it is obvious she must have enjoyed—her present life of ease; but it is a fact that invariably she would begin to suppress her yawns about nine-thirty; and, after continual glances at the clock, punctually at ten she would fold her fancy-work, or shut up her novel decidedly. This was the signal for 'Papa's' unfailing remark about beauty sleep, and her trite rejoinder:

'Pray don't sit up too late; you know you've to be up in the morning.'

Fond as they were of 'Mamma,' it was always with a certain sense of relief father and daughter heard the door close (very gently) behind her.

The evenings were mostly spent in the study. The Victorian tradition of handsomely furnishing several large rooms and habitually occupying a small one was naturally observed in the House of Barrett. The study was lined with books. These

had been supplied in uniform binding by the furnishing firm that had 'done' the big house for Jeremiah Barrett. He was no reader in the ordinary sense of the word; yet no one ever enjoyed a library of books more than Jeremiah. The sense of their companionship warmed—the thought of their ownership enriched—him; then, too, at any moment he might stretch forth a hand and draw out a smooth leather-bound volume with a pleasant luxury of touch, open it haphazard and find words of wisdom and beauty—something that would strike him as absolutely original yet surprisingly true. At times he was positively frightened, with a pleasant, surprised sort of fear, when he found some formless, incoherent thought of his own that had hovered just out of his reach, alluring and baffling, caught and set down plainly on the page before him.

To-night, awaiting 'Mamma's' departure, he kept a blunt-ended finger between the leaves of his book; he hurried the beauty-sleep joke, and positively galloped over his little nightly observance of opening and closing the door. In truth, he hardly concealed his anxiety to see the last of his 'good lady.' He often called her that; she gave an answering 'bridle' (the art went out with good Queen Victoria) and counted it as a compliment.

"See here, Edith," he said as he plumped back into his easy-chair with a force that set the castors rolling back from the hearth. The night was warm and the fireplace appropriately hidden by a screen. Seaweed, ferns, dried grasses and butterflies were all pressed flat between the double glass of it.

"See here, my lass. Talking of happiness——"
No one had been talking of it.

"Now, you look here. I opened this book just anywhere—in the only fashion a book should be opened—and see here, what it had for me——"
Slightly waving the book to emphasise the points, he read out in his rasping voice :

"‘I call any creature ‘happy’ that can love or that can exult in the sense of life : and I hold the kinds of happiness common to children and lambs, to girls and birds, to good servants and good dogs, for no less God-like than the most refined raptures of contemplation attained to by philosophers.’ ”

"That's Ruskin," said Edith.

"That's sense, which is more to the point. And truth, which is more important still. I don't care a hang who is it says a thing ; it is what he has to say as matters to me. Children, lambs, birds and girls—they know, bless 'em, as they've a clear right to be happy——"

"Or are happy without knowing anything about it."

"Anyway, they've the right. I'm not clever like you, Edith—not with that sort of cleverness. I can't take words, like 'Mamma' does her silks, and make patterns and things. But I can see what's true, plain as any man, or any woman either. And I've said once, and I say it again—we was meant to be happy."

"That is what Linda says." Edith was sitting back in her chair, her attitude, as always, just a little studiedly graceful.

Her father looked up sharply, shut-to his book and replaced it in the book-case at his elbow.

"That young lady," he said, "has got a lot of sense in that little head of hers—though it is a pretty one, an' all."

"You think her pretty?" Edith was sufficiently feminine to be discursive when it was a question of another woman's looks.

"I do." Jeremiah banged his hand down with unnecessary violence on the arm of his chair. It was solid Victorian, yet it emitted a little gasping breath of dust as a protest.

"To my taste," the old man went on, "that little lady's a sight bonnier than young madam. Young madam does to look at for a bit, like a picture; but t'other's sort's like a book; you'll not tire of it. Always something fresh to please you." He brought his hands together on his knee. "You'd tire sooner, wouldn't you, of a picture than a book, any day?"

He bent forward and gazed with apparent interest at a flattened butterfly in the fire-screen, while he murmured:

"Don't like it. Sort of dressed-up to catch the eye. Don't satisfy you inside, it doesn't."

Then he went on confidentially:

"I don't mind telling you, Edith——" he glanced up at the closed door and appeared to listen. Never once had 'Mamma' returned after her ten-o'clock departure.

Jeremiah nodded.

"I wouldn't unsettle *her* mind about it; but I wish—I do wish Rod had chosen the other. I have a curious feeling he oughter 'a chosen the other.

You know how he spoke about her when he came back from Cornwall. Not that exactly ; but little things he let drop. Straws, I did think, to show which way tide was setting. I thought, at the time, to see further than he did, and I says to myself—'Ho! ho! so you'll be bringing me home a daughter!' And I wasn't jealous a bit that I can swear to—I seemed to warm to the thoughts of her. The name—Linda Ray. It was the way he spoke her name seemed to tell me ; so as you could see the sunlight pouring down through the lime trees and hear the bees, humming away, rare and busy over the honey."

He passed his hand over his head.

"Seems I was on the wrong track, all the time, I was. Fact was, I had an idea just before he went off—he did go off rather sudden—that young madam had given him the go-by. I never thought much about that. A young chap will be after the petticoats, and as I said to him, soon as ever I saw the down on his chin, 'There's safety in numbers——' Well, well——" he clasped his hands tightly, the big coarse thumbs up-sticking. "Tell me, lass, what do you think about it?"

"In the end," she said slowly, "in the end it may be the best thing for Rodney."

"In the end?" He considered her words. "In the end? Do you think she'll make the boy happy?"

"I think," Edith stated deliberately, "she will make him very unhappy. But that may be the best thing for Rodney."

Jeremiah shook his head.

"Now you go against Nature. Happiness is the

true fulfilling of the Law. The Law is order—unhappiness, disorder.”

“Strength comes out of disorder. Rodney needs strength. Father, you have erred in kindness. You have made life too easy for both of us.”

He shook his head.

“No, that I haven’t. I’ve but cleared the way of the things that hinder. Life without a helping hand is like bricks without straw, and you have the Bible for that. Maybe, you’ll make the bricks, if you’re not over and above disheartened; but you won’t make many—and they’ll not be good bricks, not up to sample, anyway.”

He spoke heatedly. Edith wondered how she had hurt him. Long ago she had recognised the sensitive soul under her father’s rough exterior; for a long time now it had been the sensitive soul she had held as father.

“Of course,” she said gently, “you did your best, always, for both of us; and I may be mistaken about Rodney.”

“I back your opinion against the rest.” He spoke without assurance, though, and cautiously.

“I can’t see,” Edith said, “that it is really our part to help or to hinder. Rodney has made his choice. Only Time can show the wisdom or unwisdom of it.”

“It is *her* we want to prove,” Jeremiah said, almost furtively. “To prove before it is too late, that is.”

“She’ll come out all right,” Edith said hastily. “Otherwise Linda Ray would not think so much of her.”

“That does not follow. Girls read themselves

into their friends. Any flesh and blood serves to clothe an ideal. And then they'll turn round and abuse it. Might as well blame the man whose ready-mades are too small for him."

"He is to blame for not choosing more wisely."

"What if they've been given, thrust on to the poor beggar——"

For a few minutes there was silence. Then Jeremiah rolled his chair close to his daughter's; grasping the arms, shuffling his feet to do it whilst still seated.

"I have been thinking hard," he said. "I want to get hold of something as'll prove just how much there is in young madam. And if, at the same time, we can test Rodney—— You yourself said he'd be better to find himself sharp up against something—— Must shirk or climb over——"

"Yes," Edith said, smiling.

"You seem to be pretty sure of him!"

"I *am* sure of Rodney."

"And of young madam?"

"Does she come into it?"

"That's what I've to work out at present."

"You have a plan, then?"

"Only this minute."

"Am I to know it?"

"No—better not."

"It is taking form, then?"

He laughed.

"It's a wick 'un, this idea of mine, already." He rubbed his hands on his knees. "It'll be a bit of fun too—good as a play for some of us."

"But, suppose"—Edith looked straight at her father, speaking very slowly—"suppose Rodney

does not climb, suppose his life *has* made him too soft, too yielding. You are counting on the success of your plan, whatever it is ; all the same, you must be ready to face failure."

Jeremiah sobered, his mouth quivered like that of a disappointed baby.

"It'll be a big drop," he said ; "it will that. Though I don't say but what it'll be better to know worst, like ; and begin building of him up more bravely."

"And suppose *she* does not stand the test ? "

"Young madam ? Like as not she won't. All the same, I have a notion as Rodney'll live to thank me."

"And I am to know nothing ? "

"Better not, lass, though I'd have liked well enough to have had you in with me. It wouldn't 'a been fair to you, neither."

"If I guess—— ?"

"I look to you to stand by."

"And Mother ? "

"She'll believe owt I tell her. She's a true wife—God bless the woman."

"It will be very interesting, no doubt, but——"

"But what ? out with it."

"Is it right ? I mean, I gather you are going to——"

"Aye ! but for a jolly good purpose."

"The means justified by the end ? "

He laughed.

"We don't know the end, and that's just the sport of it."

"Father, you are nothing but a big boy."

"And this is my ' play, ' "

"I trust your play will be harmless."

"Worst come to worst, it'll harm me more'n anybody."

"How can it harm you?"

"By taking away from my trust in Roddy."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE HERO ASSERTS HIMSELF

"My dear!" Cecil burst into Linda's room. "I've had the most extraordinary letter from Rodney." Her cheeks flamed, her mouth quivered and twitched.

"From Rodney?" Linda sprang from her place at the writing-table. "Tell me quick, what has happened?"

"Happened! Things don't 'happen' to people in real life, ever. Nothing's happened—not to call, happened."

As Linda sat down she neatly replaced her pen on the inkstand. As usual, Cecil was no doubt exciting herself about nothing.

In all probability Rodney's letter had started with 'Dearest' instead of 'Darling,' or the other way round. At times, Linda found something overpoweringly tiring in the way Cecil magnified trifles. It had been right enough in the old days. At school you were grateful to anyone who *could* make much out of little. Now, Life seemed too important to be frittered away and wasted.

She smiled a little as she said:

"Well, am I to hear about this most extraordinary letter?"

"You are laughing at me, Linda, and I've half a mind not to tell you. Only I really must tell

someone——” She drew out the letter. “You may as well read it.”

Linda flushed.

“I’d much rather not, thank you.”

“*He* wouldn’t mind, if that’s what you are thinking of. He thinks a tremendous lot of your opinion, I can assure you. And his letters are not a bit sloppy. There is nothing——” She was glancing down the opened page. “This one is even less ‘lovely’ than usual.”

Linda’s heart was beating quickly; she was aching to read the letter, to see Rodney behind the phrases, to visualise him in the very formation of the letters—even to touch for a moment the inanimate thing he had handled.

She denied herself. She felt she would dishonour her affection for Cecil, perhaps even her attitude towards Rodney, by yielding.

“You read out the parts you want to explain to me,” she suggested.

“If you’d rather.” Cecil’s brows were contracted, her lips moved silently, then formed disjointed sentences:

“‘You may be surprised . . . must ask you to trust me . . . shall be coming back sooner. . . .’”

“That seems all right so far.”

“Um!—no . . . listen to this—‘I have always thought of my father, of the great business he has built up, as stable, fixed things, a part of the backbone of the world, almost. Nothing is really stable or fixed, so it seems. Father writes of great changes, threatened losses. It may mean poverty for all of us. It may mean, for me, the giving up of my profession. I own it would be particularly hard

just now, in every way. When I sat down to write, I intended to say you must decide for me. But I begin to see that would be shirking. I'll have to thrash the thing out for myself. Father leaves the matter to me entirely. But I can see he wants me. Only I'm afraid he thinks I could be a great deal more help in the business than I should be. It is a bit hard, anyway, seeing all he has done for me——' "

Cecil broke off :

"There's a lot more like that ; but it wouldn't interest you."

Linda's heart gave a quick thump, but she said nothing.

Cecil flung herself into a chair.

"I don't know what to say, or to think, about it." She sat bolt upright, the letter tightly held in her hands ; her dominant note was one of anger.

There was a momentary silence, and when at last Linda spoke, her words, from Cecil's point of view, were hardly sympathetic.

"His work means so much to him," she said thoughtfully.

"I can't see much in that. Why did he choose such a silly sort of thing as architecture ? "

"How do you mean ? "

"Why, if he'd gone into something with plenty of money—Stock Exchange or something big in the City—he wouldn't have had to throw it over to help his father. I expect the silly old man has been speculating or something, or his beastly Brassy-shine would have gone on coining money——" She moved restlessly. "I am in a horrid hole, anyhow. How on earth shall I advise Rodney ? "

"He does not ask you to, does he?" Linda said it hesitatingly. "I thought he said he must settle it for himself."

"He says so; but of course he doesn't mean it. Men always say that, but, all the while, they want you to advise them, so that when it turns out wrong they can blame you afterwards."

"That seems more a woman's way than a man's. Rodney's not like that, at all events," Linda contended.

"You seem to be pretty sure about him. Personally I don't know what to think about it. To make matters worse, he says his plans are finished, and, though he pretends not to be satisfied with them, I expect they are awfully good and he'll win the thing, and then, after all, he'll not be able to go in for it."

"I thought, before, you did not care much about it?"

"It's better than Brassyshine, anyway. Though that wouldn't matter so much so long as there were piles and piles of money in it. You can always look away or put down your sunshade that side. I particularly dislike that one with the grinning page displaying his buttons. But now it seems to me the old man's going down hill and wants to drag his son with him."

"I don't seem able to understand it," said Linda.

"I don't expect to." Cecil's tone was acid.

Linda went on with her own train of thought, unconcernedly.

"I can't see how his going into the business will save it if it is in a bad way really."

"I give it up," Cecil returned petulantly. "Rod-

ney says, if he does, he'll have to go into the workshops and understand the thing right from the beginning, just like a workman!" Her voice grew shrill with horror. "I have a cousin learning engineering; he has to wear overalls and creep into boilers."

"That wouldn't hurt him."

"Think of his hands. Rodney has beautiful hands, like his mother's. Edith's are ugly, have you noticed? He'd be all oily!"

"Do you think they have boilers for Brassy-shine?"

"How should I know? It's sure to be messy." She tapped an impatient toe. "I've been a fool, that's what it is," she broke out petulantly, "and I do think my people—— You hear such a lot about age and experience—I do think they might have warned me——"

"Would you have listened?" Linda asked it indignantly.

"I don't suppose I should; but that doesn't make it a bit the less maddening."

"But, Cecil"—Linda's voice shook—"you do—*care* for Rodney?"

"I suppose I do," she said discontentedly; "though I am not at all sure sometimes. Really, I don't think I like him as much as before we were engaged. Perhaps it is always like that, though. How am I to know? *I've* had no experience. What I mean is—he's just as sweet and all that—and it's lovely to know that he loves me madly—and I expect we'll be quite all right as soon as we are married. It's all this waiting about that does it. And now, I suppose, with all this happening, it'll

be *years* before we get married. I mean, he isn't as jolly, somehow. He hasn't ever been so jolly since that time I sent him away to Cornwall. I suppose he doesn't feel sure of me, or something. He seems so far away sometimes. I don't get to know him a bit better, really. Not as well, perhaps, as I did at the beginning. And I thought it would be so splendid to find out all about the mind of the man who loves you. And it's not as though I'd been stand-offish. He's quieter, too, or I fancy he's quieter. Anyhow"—she blinked her lashes and dabbed at her cheeks with a scrap of a handkerchief—"being engaged isn't a bit what I thought it was going to be. Even before all this bother——"

Linda, thinking the moment had come for active sympathy went and sat down beside her. Cecil leant her head on a convenient shoulder, and said, with a sniff :

"You are a dear, always, and worth a dozen of Rodney."

"No, no, Cecil, you don't really mean it." The pain in Linda's voice was evident ; only by keeping hold of Cecil and Rodney's love one for the other did Life seem at all possible.

"Of course I do mean it. I believe I've made a mistake. Well," she gulped, "it's not too late. People *do* break off their engagements."

"But, Cecil—think of *him* !"

'You must not ! you shall not !' a voice in Linda's heart was saying. To have won the love of Rodney, and to throw it carelessly away ! The thing was unspeakable !

Cecil dabbed at her eyes.

"I'll have to think it all over, I suppose. I wish

we hadn't let anyone know ; then it wouldn't so much have mattered."

" You care what people would say ? As though that mattered ! The only thing is—how would he bear it ? Cecil, think of what it would be to him ! "

" You don't seem to consider me. And I am your friend, not Rodney. You might think of me a little. You see, I've told everyone he's an architect, such a refined sort of a thing—and then, to think ! —I may have a husband in overalls, creeping into boilers, or however it is they make that beastly Brassyshine—Barett's Brassyshine ! It stinks in my nostrils already." She sprang to her feet, almost upsetting Linda in her haste. " Never mind ! " she exclaimed, " he isn't in the business yet ! "

She went to the glass and looked at her eyes and cheeks with annoyance. " What have you got for this ? " she asked. " What do you use ? "

" Me ?—nothing."

" I thought you spoke the truth always." Cecil was opening sundry pots and caskets. " Here's powder, anyway."

Whilst manipulating a tiny puff with care and precision, she questioned :

" Linda, what do you think Rodney will do ? "

" Do ! How do you mean ? " Linda was looking out of the window. The sun was shining brightly, yet it seemed pale to her ; at her heart was a sick feeling. If only the chance might have been hers to help a man like Rodney to rise to the highest that was in him !

" I mean "—Cecil paused, powder-puff suspended—" will he chuck architecture and descend to Brassy-

shine ; or will he stick out for his rights and let his father sink or swim without him ? ”

“ If you ask me ”—because she was feeling so deeply, Linda’s voice was cold and constrained—“ if you ask me, I have not a doubt that he will do—what is right.”

“ Burked ! The point is, which is the right thing ? There’s where I want an answer.”

Linda pressed her hands tightly together, swallowed hard, moistened her lips, and said slowly :

“ To give up his own wishes and do all he can for his father.”

To her it seemed solemn and splendid, and yet in a way pathetic—this thing Rodney was to do. Unconsciously, to heighten the splendour she over-estimated the young man’s pride in his profession, painted too sordidly the manufacture of the harmless metal polish. She would have repulsed any suggestion that, the first disappointment over, Rodney would bid ‘ good-bye ’ to architecture with philosophy and take a quite wholesome interest in the working of the family factory. Linda was Rodney’s lover, so for her he must be altogether splendid !

Cecil laughed quite cheerfully.

“ The best of talking things over is that you sort them out and see them more plainly. When I came in here it all seemed such a muddle. Now it’s quite simple.”

Linda sprang up impulsively, her eyes were shining.

“ I am so glad, darling. Won’t it be splendid to help him ! ”

“ Help him ? I see—yes—I suppose it will be

helping him, in the long run. I am going to back Rodney for all I am worth against his father."

"Cecil! no!"

"Linda! yes!"

"It would not be right!"

Cecil laughed.

"Right or wrong, who is to settle? Anyway, I know what I am going to do."

"You will not alter his decision."

"I shall, though; that is, if he has decided to give in to old Brassyshine." She flushed. "Linda, I thought at one time you cared something for Rodney. I was stupid enough to be almost jealous. I see now I must have been mistaken. You would never coolly, heartlessly, consign a man you cared about to a life of dirt and drudgery. You can't have much perception of character, or you would know Rodney would never be able to stand it. To hear you, he might be an ordinary commonplace drudger. I should have thought, even during the time you have known him, you might have judged him better——" She spoke rapidly, breathless with excitement and anger.

Linda was white and still. Her lips felt stiff, as she answered:

"I still do not think you will be able to persuade him."

"Oh yes I shall." Cecil threw up her head, her eyes glinted ominously.

"Not against his conscience," said Linda slowly.

"It will be me, then, or his conscience."

"Cecil, you don't mean——"

"I do. It has come to this: he must choose between me and his vulgar old father."

"Cecil!"

"Child, you bore me to death with your parrot-like 'Cecils.'"

Linda's lips quivered.

"We need not, at all events, quarrel."

"I don't mind quarrelling. It would be rather a relief just at present."

"Not afterwards——"

Tears rose to Cecil's eyes.

"Look here, Linda, you know I do love you really, only you do aggravate me at times."

"You did not really mean what you said about—Rodney?"

"I am not quite sure." Cecil hedged. "Anyway, it is no use deciding till I have seen him."

Linda grasped at the straw.

"No. You can't decide till you see him."

After all, the straw was worth grasping, Rodney was ever so much stronger, she knew it, than Cecil.

CHAPTER XIX

THE MOTHER OF THE HERO

“ANN—I suppose, though I ought not to speak of it——”

Mrs. Barrett was quivering on the verge of the mild form of hysteria for which at times Ann was obliged to slap her mistress's hands and administer sal volatile.

“Now, you tell me, if it'll make you feel better.” Ann's little red eyes behind their white lashes looked eager. Hers was a staunch, faithful soul, but not on a level above vulgar curiosity. Besides, the inherent weakness of loyalty is a desire to stand on an intimate footing. Jealous weakness rather than virtuous strength often goes to the keeping of secrets. Such were perfectly safe with Ann England—she gloated too much in the sense of possession to share them.

“Now, you just tell me if it'll make you feel better.” Ann stood up spare and square before her mistress and spoke as one having authority.

Mrs. Barrett was seated in the corner of one of the big chintz-covered chairs in her bedroom. Her neat grey locks were a trifle disordered as though she had been thrusting her fingers through the hair on her temples, but now the clenched knuckles of one hand were pressing into the palm of the other con-

vulsively ; her whole agitated appearance promised some interesting disclosure. Though unfeignedly sorry for the distress of her mistress, Ann was, nevertheless, capable of enjoying the situation.

"I don't know that there is anything to tell, really." A tear rolled down Mrs. Barrett's left cheek, her tongue, insect-fashion, darted out and caught it at the corner of her mouth dexterously. There had been times in her life when not to acknowledge tears had saved the situation.

"But there must be something, m'am," Ann persisted ; "it's not as though you was one to 'tue' yourself all for nothing."

Mrs. Barrett dropped a little more forward.

"No," she said, with a half-sob ; "no one could accuse me rightly of giving in till the last."

"That, indeed, they could not," Ann chimed in reassuringly.

Mrs. Barrett altered the position of her lean hands so that the finger-tips were pressed together ; her massive rings slipped down, hanging loosely.

"It's—Ann—it's"—her voice took on sorrow—"I am sure—nearly sure, that is—there is something—about Master Rodney——"

"There's naught amiss there——"

Rodney was the weak spot in the old servant's armour, so her voice hardened whenever she spoke of him.

"It is true," Mrs. Barrett admitted, "all seemed right in *my* letter. But your master had one too, and did not show it to me. He said it was only about business."

"I shouldn't doubt, then, it was about business," Ann said judicially.

"Why should he not let me read it?"

"That's beyond me. You can't use a tape-measure to the mind of a man. You may be sure, though, with the master, he's reasons, and middlin' good ones. And so that bit of a letter's all there is of trouble?" She could not keep a note of disappointment out of the question.

Mrs. Barrett was too absorbed in self to notice it.

"That is only a part." She leant forward, a meagre, weak little figure—in spite of its handsome gown, or perhaps because of it, something pitiful. "That is only part of it. I feel sure something is happening, or has happened, and they are keeping it from me. There is so much harm done by kindness—keeping things back—breaking things gently—not letting you know—it is far worse to grope in the dark. Fancied things are bigger, more terrible——"

"Now, don't you give way to no fancyings. That's nerves, that is."

"It's all very well to talk so. Unmarried women like you, Ann, keep all their nerves in their own bodies; there's no excuse for their getting disordered. But for us mothers the nerves get stretched out—attenuated is the word—till they are drawn fine as gossamer; every breath of fear and anxiety moves them."

"If it wasn't you speaking, m'am, I'd say 'stuff and nonsense.' I think I'd best get you some sal volatile."

"No, no"—Mrs. Barrett rested her chin on her hands, her elbows on her knees—"sal volatile cannot administer to a mind—distressed," she finished by happy inspiration. Then, flying off at a tangent,

she remarked, "Whatever it is, Miss Edith either knows or suspects it."

"Why not ask Miss Edith, then?" Ann suggested prosaically.

"I think—I'm really afraid to ask her."

"That's your own fault for having brought of her up too clever. She'd ought to have been kept under when she was little. Always asking questions, was Miss Edith. I'd have slapped her, if it'd been me. I would that."

"She says she is still asking questions."

"Not of me, anyhow." Ann spoke in the Heaven-be-thanked tone which is yet a little resentful.

"Miss Edith says she asks questions of life," Mrs. Barrett spoke impressively.

"It's safe to ask where you won't get an answer," Ann concluded.

"Miss Edith's the sort to insist on an answer."

Ann sniffed.

"You can't get blood out of a stone. But as to Master Rodney, now he was a comfortable bairn and believed what you told him."

"Did he? I mean, I wonder, does he? There are those who seem to, only because they are too lazy to question or too shy to differ."

Ann fired.

"You can't call Master Rodney lazy, not with truth you can't; and him making his back ache over them everlasting drawings. Shy, neither you can't; though time was when he'd hide his face in my skirt and I'd use to scold him for it; though never could I be hard on Master Rodney. There it was, I couldn't." Her sandy little face softened to a mother-look at some recollection.

"Lor', m'am," she broke out, "to think when he was that innocent he did use to say he'd marry me when he was grown."

"No, always me, Ann," Mrs. Barrett corrected.

"Me, anyway, when we was alone."

This statement being unanswerable, Mrs. Barrett returned to the source of her trouble.

"Why should the master tell me not to worry?"

"He wouldn't do that, so as there was nothing to worry about."

Ann's interest quickened. By nature she scented trouble as a ferret does blood. She had something of the appearance of a ferret—a story-book ferret—with a character of its own.

"It wasn't as though I had said anything," Mrs. Barrett continued, "I hadn't. He kissed me spontaneously and said—said . . ."—"Old girl" had been the words, supplied by a blank in the revised version—"he said, 'you've no need to worry.'"

"Well, so you haven't then. Not if the master says so."

"Ann, I can't help it. I feel in the dark, and people behind me, and moving about, and treading over me without taking any notice."

"You're quite sure Master Rodney ails nothing?"

"My letter was written only yesterday—in ink." Mrs. Barrett drew comfort from the last fact. Since the very first of Rodney's boarding-school days a pencilled letter had always set her mother-heart a-jump with presage of disaster. Rodney had never had a serious illness or accident, yet his mother had suffered every conceivable one on his behalf, and many times over. Rodney had not known. If he had he would probably have set her down as 'silly.'

"Well," Ann considered, "so as he isn't ill, I can't see as there's much to cry over. It's not as though he's the wild sort."

If, for Ann, Master Rodney did just fall short of perfection it was on account of the lack of a touch of wildness. Her soul was an undeveloped one, clearly left over from feudal generations.

Mrs. Barrett flushed.

"Master Rodney has always been steady."

"So far as we know, he has." It was thus, in her own mind, Ann strengthened her idol's position.

"I don't doubt for a moment, and I am sure you do not." If she was sure, the reproof in Mrs. Barrett's tone was quite unnecessary. "Master Rodney has not got into any vulgar trouble. It is not that."

"D'you think—can it be this engagement business? Miss Wolney—I grant she's a beautiful lady—but——"

"There is no 'but,' Ann; no 'but' at all in question."

Her manner forced Ann's ready response.

"Of course there isn't, even without you'd say so."

"I do not know what to think." Bent still farther forward, Mrs. Barrett regarded her shoes. She had small, pretty feet; in the old days of sordid economy she had suffered much from ill-made and shabby shoes; she revelled now in new and dainty ones, and if sometimes they pinched her, no one was any the wiser. Looking down at her shoes, with their winking buckles, she said meditatively:

"I cannot think there is anything wrong with the business."

"Wrong with the business," Ann echoed, but

with an incredulous inflection. "Don't you run away with that idea. Why, you can scarce go the length of a street but what you see half a dozen of our coloured posters. Used as I am to it, I can't but stop for a look at that there audacious page with the buttons. I've heard them say none but the most flourishing businesses could keep up all them posters."

"I don't understand business matters," her mistress stated, "but I fancy they must cost a great deal of money."

"That as good as tells you the profits," said Ann triumphantly.

"If something were wrong," Mrs. Barrett went on reflectively, "I hardly think the master would be in such excellent spirits. He certainly does seem in the best of spirits."

"Might be put on," Ann suggested. She showed a pessimistic turn of mind occasionally.

Mrs. Barrett sighed.

"Anyhow, I do wish he would tell me."

"Can't you ask of him?"

"I could, certainly, but as certainly he would not answer should he not feel disposed to. He would put me off. As they always do with us. They think us silly. We have let them. I suppose because it was easier, or we thought to get more by it. And now it is too late to alter."

"Miss Edith does not think so." Ann's tone was what she herself would have called 'snotty.'

"Miss Edith is young yet. Her ideas are working."

"Like yeast?"

"Like dough. The bread may be good when it comes to the baking."

"Rather her, then, than me to the eating. Old-fashioned ways are good enough for me."

"For me, too, Ann. But, I suppose, we are old fashioned, both of us."

"None the worse for that, neither."

"Sometimes I have doubts. To be old-fashioned is to be different ; there is unrest in difference. At times rest seems the one thing desirable." She rose to her feet rather stiffly. "I have calls to pay, and must be getting ready."

With sudden alacrity Ann rushed to the wardrobe.

"What will you wear, m'am ? "

She always went through the fictitious ceremony of asking. In the end, after Mrs. Barrett had offered ineffectual reasons why the plainest, most shabby of her gowns was the most suitable for the particular occasion, Ann had the last word and decided on something handsome. It was she, not her mistress, who drew pleasure from the well-stocked wardrobe. In her richest attire Mrs. Barrett had an air of protest rather than pleasure. She enjoyed buying things, but was uncertain of herself when the moment came to wear them.

CHAPTER XX

CONCERNING THE RÔLE OF A HERO

"HANG! Dash! Blow! Stop your ears if you like, Linda. I don't see why I shouldn't say it. I am going to—— Damn! *Damn!*—There! I feel better already."

Stormily Cecil entered her sanctum, swept a small table clear—fortunately it was a 'silver' one and nothing was broken—flung down on it sundry possessions, sat down with a bang on the sofa, and stared at Linda defiantly.

Linda, her pupils dilated, questioned in silence.

Cecil shrugged her shoulders.

"I should think even you will allow I've a right to be angry."

"Why, 'even'——?"

"Because, of course, you are so saintly."

"Cecil!" Linda was one great protest against the unkindly aspersion.

"Yes, you are." Cecil's nostrils were quivering. "You are always showing me up and making me feel what a beast I must be. And I don't like it."

"I don't see how you can say so." Linda's eyes were more than usually bright by reason of the tears that filled them.

"I don't say you mean it. I don't suppose you would be so beastly. You can't help it, of course.

I'm just about mad though when I catch myself thinking Linda wouldn't have said this, or done that."

"Have I been doing, or leaving undone, anything special?"

"Not at the moment. I just had to fly out at somebody."

"What has happened?"

"Everything—and nothing. You knew I was to meet Rodney at Fuller's. It happened to be convenient. And then that stupid Madame Courie kept me hours and hours fitting. It really was all Rodney's fault, because, of course, when you're engaged it is only natural to want yourself decent. I was bothered about being late, of course, and was going to be extra nice to him. He must have thought I'd forgotten. As though I should!"

"He waited a full hour"—Linda could not quite control her voice—"and then concluded you must be ill."

"I'm never ill; he ought to know that by now," Cecil retorted. "And to cap it all, I rush back here, wildly angry, only to find he's left without seeing me. It was horrid having to ask those beastly young women—I knew they were smiling, though they didn't show it. Of course, I said it was my brother, but I couldn't help not being sisterish. I took a taxi, making sure he'd be here. I think I've some right to be angry." Her eyes were shining, she was splitting one of her gloves with vicious deliberation.

"He couldn't stay," Linda assured her rather heatedly; "it was business for Mr. Weston."

"You seem to know more about him than I do." The words darted out like the tongue of a serpent.

"Only because I happened to be in, and he asked to see me." Linda's voice dropped soothingly.

"Was it necessary?"

"Only that I might explain things to you."

Cecil sneered.

"Very thoughtful of Rodney."

"He was quite upset. He said you had never kept him waiting."

"As for that"—Cecil brought down the tortured glove on to the table smartly—"I *always* do—on principle."

"Hardly for an hour. As it was, it had been difficult for him to spare the time. He had several business appointments."

"He had no right to have business appointments when he is only just back from Scotland. What's the good of travelling all night to go and waste his time on business. You must own it's hard on me—you seeing him when I haven't."

"You will see him to-night."

"I'm not so sure. It would jolly well punish him if I had a headache and didn't come down to dinner. Better still, if I went off somewhere. I could, easily. The Craigs would be only too glad if I changed my mind. They are so specially kind to me, I didn't like putting them off a bit; besides, I want to see 'The Sword-Bearer.' You know my weakness for Martin Roberts. And they say he's splendid. Only, of course, as soon as I knew Rodney was coming—though now I don't know——"

"Yes, you do, Cecil. You know you are dying to see Rodney. And you wouldn't care two straws for any play on earth if all the while you were thinking you had been unkind to him."

"I'm not that sort. Not a bit of it. I should be flirting hard with Monty Craig and thinking him ever so much pleasanter than Rodney, and twice as handsome."

"You wouldn't, I'm sure you wouldn't. Montague Craig is right enough, but there's nothing whatever in him."

"I don't mind that so long as he thinks there is plenty in *me*. And he does, I do assure you. Honestly, Linda, I don't believe I satisfy Rodney. I sometimes doubt whether he really does love me."

"But why?"

"This afternoon—oh! and heaps of things. Anyhow, I am going to put him to the test. If he loves me enough to do as I tell him I shall be satisfied."

Linda deliberately turned away her eyes and her voice was not quite steady as she asked—the answer meant so much to Cecil and to Rodney:

"What do you mean to tell him to do?"

Cecil laughed.

"What will jump, I fancy, with his own inclination; to give up all that tommy-rot of the old man and the Brassy-business."

There was a slight pause before Linda, rather to her own surprise, heard herself saying very quietly:

"I don't think he will do it."

"You seem to be pretty sure about Rodney." Cecil spoke coldly.

Had she said too much? Linda wondered.

"It was only"—she stumbled—"only, I gathered—from what he said——"

"So you were talking over *our* affairs. Rather odd, wasn't it?"

"It did not seem odd at the time. It wasn't odd, really; we were friends down in Cornwall."

"I'm always forgetting"—Cecil's manner was frigid—"that you and Rodney were—*friends*—down in Cornwall."

Linda swallowed hard before she said gently:

"You were pleased, at first, when you knew it."

"I dare say I was. I was amiable then, because I was happy. I'm unhappy now, and naturally I am horrid. You must just put up with it though, if you still care anything about me."

"You *know* I do."

"I don't seem to feel so sure of things as I used to. I seem to have grown hard somehow. I mean, I wouldn't mind, as I once would have, if you turned against me. I don't care as much as I did whether Rodney loves me. Linda, if you only knew how awful it is—trying to feel things and you can't feel them any longer."

"Why does anyone want to feel anything, I wonder?" Linda's voice was tense and strained. "It is far better not to feel," she added, as though to herself.

"No, it isn't," Cecil contended sharply, "it's hateful. Like being dead before you need be. There have been times when I've felt a nasty little sore feeling, thinking I've made anyone suffer. I know now, I needn't. Lucky beasts they were to be able to suffer."

"Do you mean," Linda asked with a wakening curiosity, "that you feel just numb, as though nothing mattered?"

"Not numb exactly. I feel that I still could feel—feel hard, if the right thing happened to make me."

"I see," Linda said, which, as usual, being interpreted, meant she did not.

"I think," Cecil announced seriously, "that I want to be jealous. Or is it that I am jealous? I know I don't want to think of you and Rodney sitting here and talking together, yet my mind keeps hovering round it, like a nasty little child trying to overhear a grown-up secret."

"There is nothing secret about it," Linda returned proudly.

Cecil flushed.

"I didn't mean there was. Don't be stupid. Still, of course, if there's anything you'd rather not tell me——"

"I want to tell you. All along I have been trying to tell you. Not that there was anything particular."

Cecil stooped for a fallen cigarette-case, opened and found it empty.

"Bother those servants! I'm quite sure they steal my cigarettes," she said petulantly.

"There were none in it yesterday."

"Perhaps not. I can't be bothered to remember things like that." She rose languidly, hunted in unlikely places, came upon some cigarettes unexpectedly, lit one, and came back to her sofa.

"Fire away," she said, "I'm ready to listen."

Whilst Cecil had been fidgeting about, Linda sat quite still, her arm resting on the table, her fingers holding a pencil. When bidden to 'fire away' she recalled her thoughts with an evident effort, and, seeming to concentrate them on the point of the pencil, began in a low, even voice:

"Rodney was shown in here. I was writing."

"How did he look?" Cecil took her cigarette from her lips to ask eagerly.

"Tired and worried, I thought. Rather pale, too; but that might have been the night journey."

Cecil knocked the ash off her cigarette—her face had brightened.

"He was really cut-up at not seeing me?" She said it with satisfaction.

"He was very glad to hear there was nothing wrong, and we settled the best thing he could do was just to wait for you here. He said a quarter of an hour would have to be the limit because of some appointment."

"He didn't wait as long as that?" Cecil was aggrieved again directly.

"When the fifteen minutes had gone he looked at his watch and said, 'I'll risk another five.'"

Cecil looked pleased.

"After all, I believe I'll see him to-night, and I'll wear that little mauve frock—the one you like, with the roses."

Linda smiled, remembering what Rodney's words had been. 'I'll risk another five; it's not often there's a chance of thrashing things out with someone so clear-headed. And it has got to be done somehow.' Linda had been glad that Rodney thought her clear-headed. Men do not love clear-headed women, but they like them as friends, to talk to. Some time in the future when Linda's heart had attained a safe numbness, it would be nice to talk to Rodney—as a friend.

"Well?" questioned Cecil.

With a flash Linda was recalled to the present.

"Well?" Cecil repeated impatiently. "What

did you talk about? You can talk a lot—I know I could—in twenty minutes.”

“We—oh, we talked of his work.” Linda’s eyes shone and deepened. “He was awfully modest about it, yet I could see he had hopes of success, because of what people had told him. And while we were talking we forgot that he might have to give it all up—it was so exciting—and architecture is so tremendously interesting.”

“Is it? It wouldn’t be to me, because of the horrible newness. New stone and brick set my teeth on edge. Like having newly cut nails. You know the feeling.”

“Why don’t you file them?” Linda asked prosaically.

“What? The nails? I do. All the same, it’s the feeling. But go on. Tell me what Rodney said, exactly. That is, if you haven’t forgotten. I never can remember what people say, really. I always make them say what I want them to—you know my way.”

Linda did know Cecil’s way, which to herself she allowed for and glossed over as ‘Cecil’s journalistic attitude.’

“You have such a neat, well-sorted mind,” Cecil went on, “that I am sure you remember what Rodney said, exactly.”

There was a hidden taunt, Linda felt, in the words. Yet, she did remember.

“We were talking, as I said, of his plans, when all of a sudden he glanced up at the clock and said, ‘Did Cecil tell you about my letter?’”

“Did he mind my telling you?” Cecil broke in eagerly.

"No; he was glad."

"Why should he be?"

"Perhaps, because it saved time. He wanted to talk about it."

"I can't see why."

"I expect he wanted badly to talk it over with you and was disappointed." Linda rather despised herself, even though she was a little proud of her attempt at diplomacy, for she realised that it would never do to relate to Cecil how Rodney had sprung up, leant his arm on the mantelpiece, flushed, and said: 'I'd very much like, if it isn't asking too much, to have your opinion.' And how hot she had felt with embarrassed joy to think that her opinion could matter. And how he had gone on: 'You remember we used to talk things over in Cornwall.'

And her heart had nearly broken with joy and the sense of the futility of everything.

None of this might be Cecil's, hence the need for diplomacy.

"Well, then," the other urged, "what did he say next?"

"He said"—Linda was selecting from all too keen memories that kept intact not only every word of Rodney's, but the inflexion of his voice, the glance of his trusting grey eyes, the expressive movement of his mouth: it was not quite easy to settle just how much she could give to Cecil—"he said"—her words came slowly—"he said, 'I suppose in life, sooner or later, a man must be brought up sharp against something, a great choice, or a great trouble. All men have to meet it——'"

And all women. So Linda's heart had answered.

"You can't shirk it, or go round it. So far, my

life has been all plain and easy. I've had the best of luck in everything—my own people, health, friends, everything. And now it has all come upon me——' "

"Didn't he say anything at all about me?" Cecil broke in jealously.

"He didn't *say*." The accent on the verb was permissible. "But I was telling you what he did say, he said, 'Do you believe, as they used to tell us when we were kids, that the hardest course is always the right one?' 'We women like to think so,' I told him, 'because it makes sacrifice easy.' 'Is sacrifice ever easy?' he said. Then I knew for certain what I had known all along really, that he meant to sacrifice—that's not the right word though; there is a sort of I-will-be-a-martyr air about 'sacrifice,' it is too self-conscious for Rodney. He meant, I knew, to give himself, simply, whole-heartedly, as a son should, to his father's service." Warming to the thought, Linda spoke out, self-forgetting.

Cecil threw her cigarette end with careful aim behind the potted marguerites that hid the fireplace.

"That sort of thing," she said, "may be right enough for a book-hero. I don't want to marry a hero."

"But, why not?" Linda's eyes as well as her lips wondered.

"I don't want a husband on a pedestal, and me humbly taking the cloth off to display him to strangers. *He's* got to do all the worshipping."

"But," Linda objected, "some of the most everyday men are the real heroes."

"I don't want him everyday, either. He must be distinguished enough for other people to envy me,

but not so distinguished that he can ever forget how much he was honoured when *I* accepted him."

"How oddly you weigh and consider." Linda's fingers moved restlessly now, digging the pencil into a blotter. "Sometimes—there are times when I begin to doubt—that—you love him."

"According to you, Love does not weigh and consider."

"Indeed it does not. Love just *is* a glory of being, all else excluded."

"How do you know, little Linda?" Cecil laughed lightly.

The laugh hurt Linda. She faltered and coloured.

"I suppose—one can imagine."

"All a mistake," Cecil said moodily; "reality always falls so far below imagination." She drew a luxurious sigh. "Go on, tell me the rest."

"Well, then, he—he went on to say what it would mean to him. He didn't, of course, say much; yet I gathered what it would mean for him to give up the thing he cares for. By what he didn't say, really I gathered it. What he said was: 'If you go the right way to work, there's interest in everything. Have you noticed—but, no, you've not seen enough of him—how interested my father is in everything?' I was so glad I could say I *had* noticed."

"Interested in eating and money-making," Cecil interjected with a sneer that was not at all becoming.

"No, indeed; you are quite mistaken."

"I may be. As a matter of fact, I could not—really *could* not—see anything to admire in a person who makes his hair wet and brushes it forward."

Linda rather grandly ignored this sally.

"He went on to say how hard it would be for his

father to see the work of his life come toppling down after all his strength had been spent on it. 'Of course, I can throw in mine to help him, but will it help him?' He added——"

"That's just where it is," Cecil broke in excitedly. "Rodney will sacrifice himself without the old man being one penny the better. What does Rodney know about Brassysshine?"

"He means to learn."

"And then?"

"He seems to think it is his father's nerve that is going; that it is moral support he needs. And that, Rodney can give him."

"Nerves? I never could stand people with nerves. They oughtn't to think about such things. It's hardly decent. And, anyway, why should *I* be sacrificed, just because old Brassy has nerves?" She sent out her breath through her nostrils impatiently. "Great fat, vulgar thing! Last person to have nerves!"

"Can't you see Rodney's point of view, though?" Linda asked it gently, because most urgently she felt it her part to keep all fair between Rodney and Cecil, to drag her if it might be to his higher level. Rodney must not—it would be too cruel if Rodney were disappointed in Cecil!

"As for that," Cecil answered coldly, "Rodney's point of view ought to be the same as mine. We are young, we love one another, we have a right to be happy."

"What about his father and mother?"

"They are old, their day is over, they ought not to expect anything further. Anyone would tell you that is only fair."

"I am not sure that it is fair," Linda objected. "Even granting it is, would you not want the man you care for to be something more than *fair*? Supposing, for instance, that he were only *fair* towards *yourself*: would that satisfy you?"

"With me, of course, it is different."

"Why should it be? He has only known you a few months. Think of the long years during which his father has worked for him and loved him."

Cecil yawned.

"My dear, you are old-fashionedly sentimental, and at the same time horribly commonplace. Besides, you are all wrong. Doesn't it say in the Bible that 'a man must leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife'?"

"Generalities never cover particular cases. Besides, there is no question of cleaving and leaving. It is not as though he had to choose between you."

"He has though," Cecil returned doggedly. "I have made up my mind. With me it is a matter of principle. If he does not give in to me on this point, then—I have done with him."

"He will not give in." Linda spoke with sad assurance.

"So you think?"

"Somehow, I know it."

"After all, it is none of your business." Cecil spoke jerkily.

"I should not have said anything about it had you not asked me."

Cecil got up stormily.

"I don't know how it is, you seem so sure about Rodney. And I don't like it. A closed book—that is what he seems to me, often and often. And you—

you turn over the pages and read just wherever you like. I will say, you evidently made the most of your time down in Cornwall."

"Cecil," pleaded Linda, "don't say things you will be sorry for."

"As for that, I'm not saying anything. How can I help what you are thinking?" She shrugged her shoulders. "Don't blame me if you feel guilty."

Linda was sufficiently self-restrained not to utter the reply she could not help looking. Then she went out of the room with conscious gentleness.

"Ill-tempered little cat." Cecil threw the words after her friend. "I can stand a decent quarrel, there's something exhilarating in that. But the people who are too virtuous to answer back! Unfair, I call it. Personally, I loathe saintliness. I am sure I pity anyone who marries Linda. She'd make them feel in the wrong always—Rodney is a bit like that, too—sometimes I wonder——"

She stood for a long while gazing up at Rubelow's pastel of herself.

"I do wonder——" she muttered.

And after a while added aloud :

"When I do make up my mind, nothing on earth can alter me."

As she went about the room, setting to rights her scattered possessions, there was a glint in her eye, and she was humming aggressively.

CHAPTER XXI

TESTING THE HERO

CECIL had braved the forbidding countenance of the Victorian house and asked for Mr. Barrett. She would not take Linda with her. She was lusting for battle, and feared the pacific influence of her friend. The unbelievable had happened. Rodney had defied Cecil. To say 'defied' is, perhaps, if not a misstatement, certainly an overstatement of fact, for there was nothing defiant in his attitude. Yet taunts, caresses, and even tears had failed to move him. The first he had borne in silence, accepted the second, and, not without embarrassment, overlooked the third. *But*, he had not given in to Cecil.

She—checked, but not defeated—retired in good order, meditating an attack on the principal ally of the enemy. Hence her approach to the Victorian house, her demand for a parley with Jeremiah Barrett.

Mr. Barrett was at home, so the 'suffragan bishop' condescended to assure her. It had never even occurred to Cecil that Rodney's father could be out when she wanted to see him. He was in his study, enjoying a quiet half-hour after lunch before returning to the Works, where he was not above taking off his coat and displaying his snowy shirt-sleeves

in the intimate interests of his beloved Brassy-shine.

The 'suffragan bishop' knocked twice at the door deferentially before an answering voice told them to 'Come in.'

"Miss Wolney to see you."

Jeremiah was on his feet looking so consciously wide-awake that Cecil might be excused her suspicion that he had been sleeping, even without the corroboratory evidence of his flushed moist face and the two arm-chairs plainly pushed from a recent juxtaposition.

"Ah! Miss Wolney—Miss Cecil." He greeted her noisily. Cecil felt sure he would add, 'And what can I do for you?' She was afraid she would laugh if he did, and she very much wanted to be dignified with Rodney's father.

He did not say it; but with a wave of the hand offered her the arm-chair, two dents in the thick upholstery of which proclaimed the fact that his feet *had* recently rested there.

"Now this is very kind," he said blandly. "Unfortunately, my good lady is not at home."

"But it was you I wanted," Cecil informed him sweetly. "You see, I've come to talk about Rodney."

"Ah! of course—to be sure—yes, about Rodney."

He seated himself, his hands on the arms of the chair, his body well forward, so that his corpulence rested on his widespread knees. His appearance disgusted Cecil. From every point of view she despised him, and was doubly vexed, therefore, that she felt herself to be nervous.

After a moment's embarrassing silence, during which her host regarded her with unpolished intentness, he asked :

" Well, and what about Rodney ? "

" I have come to you——" Cecil was playing with her long bead chain. Jeremiah looked at it curiously. " I have come——" she repeated.

Jeremiah nodded. It was a self-evident fact the movement stated. Cecil, bolstering her courage with annoyance, went on rapidly :

" I have come to you, because—because I am sure there is some misunderstanding. You don't really want Rodney—do you?—to throw up his profession and go into—er—the—your——"

" Brassyshine job. Don't be shy of the name, young lady. It's given us bread and butter, Brassyshine has"—he gave a satisfied look round his solid book-lined room—" not to mention shrimps and water-cresses——" ' Creases ' he called them ; Cecil shuddered. " It has so, for more years than I care to count. And is like to do the same for Rodney a bit yet, not to mention any number of little Rodneys in the future."

Cecil, hating herself for it, coloured furiously. The man was *too* awful. She began desperately to long for Linda's presence. She had an idea Jeremiah would have behaved better before Linda. She swallowed her anger and went on hurriedly :

" Is there any necessity—there is surely no real necessity for Rodney to go into the business. What I mean is—can't it go on as it always has done, without him ? " Thinking she had made a good point, she brightened and went on : " It seems to me the business ought to be able to go on

making money whilst Rodney sticks to his profession."

She waited an answer. It meant so pathetically much to her that Rodney's business should be a 'profession.'

Jeremiah, when his turn came, spoke deliberately.

"Now you are asking more than I can tell you. There are ups and downs in all businesses, and a man like me as knows"—he slipped his thumbs into the arm-holes of his waistcoat—"well, it's his business to watch out for indications. Much the same as these scientific Johnnies do with the weather—very interesting it is too, cyclones and *auntie*-cyclones and depressions and the rest—astonishing how often they hit on what's coming. Well, what I want to express is—as I'm like a weather-Johnny—I sits up aloft, and looks out for business weather—and—er—so on," he ended rather abruptly.

"But what has all this to do with Rodney?"

"Everything it has to do with Rodney. Where'd he be?—where'd you be when you've married him—if Brassyshine left off shining to the tune of L. S. D.?"

"He would have his profession. I suppose people make their living at architecture."

"Precious few, and not much of a living, anyway. Architecture is a genteel employment, but not enough dirt about it for the coining of brass. It's dirt that breeds money; you'll have to make up your mind to stomach that, young lady."

Cecil shrugged her shoulders.

"What I fail to see is—if this business of yours is going to the dogs——"

Jeremiah grew apoplectic as he managed to stifle an indignant disclaimer. Brassyshine going to the dogs ! He wiped his brow with relief that it was not so, even whilst he felt sick at his disloyalty to his old Life-comrade.

“ Well, what then ? ” he murmured gruffly.

“ If it is going downhill, I don’t see how Rodney is to stop it.”

“ That’s because ”—his eyes brightened and gleamed silylly—“ because, my dear young lady, if you will excuse my saying so, you know nothing whatever about business.”

“ Of course I don’t.” Cecil’s glance was innocent and appealing.

Jeremiah saw through its wiliness, yet his vanity was flattered. It was ‘ nuts ’ to him that young madam should consider him worth flattering.

“ I’ll bet anything,” he went on briskly, “ you haven’t the beginning of an idea as to what is meant by new blood in a business ? ”

“ Sounds suggestive of cannibals.” Encouraged by her apparent success, Cecil rose to a lighter vein.

“ Sounds what it isn’t then. It’s more like putting dung to growing crops. New blood, young blood, energy, push, fresh point of view. All that is valuable to a surprising extent in a business. And that’s just where Rod comes in at the present identical moment. And I will say for the lad, he’s took and buckled to like a good ‘un.”

“ You don’t mean that—he’s started already ? ” Cecil’s voice shrilled with horror. In spite of his decided air she had not in the least realised the unalterableness of Rodney’s determination.

Jeremiah chuckled.

"Started this morning in the grinding-shop."

"He—he won't do dirty work, will he?"

"Pretty mucked up he was when I saw him."

"Did—did he mind it?"

"Mind it? Bless you, he was *enjoying* it—jolly as a cricket, Rod was. That alone's worth more than a bit to the business. Tell you what"—he spoke with sudden inspiration—"you come along with me to the Works and give him a little surprise." He laughed like a mischievous boy. "He's in borrowed overalls a sight too wide; he's not much flesh to spare, hasn't Rod. And him in a muck-sweat and that black with the dust o' the grinding you'd think twice, so you would, before you'd ask a kiss of him."

Cecil rose to her feet. This was past bearing.

"Coming are you? Now, I like that. A good plucked 'un, that's what you are, young lady." He started towards the door.

Cecil sank back into the wide arm-chair limply.

"No, no, I couldn't——" And then, as he stood, bulky, sturdy, staring down at her, "I'm not going I tell you. I won't! Nothing would make me!" She clutched her chair as though it were that of a dentist.

Slowly and with deliberation Jeremiah sat himself down. At that moment he knew himself successful, yet it was a sorry sort of a success. As a rule, he was sure of himself, now he wondered had he bungled. He had been so sure the girl was not worthy his son, had been so anxious to prove it, and now he had proved it, almost he would have been glad—perhaps for the only time in his satisfactory life he would have been glad—to find himself

in the wrong. For he could not rid his mind of the thought of his boy, Roddy, as he had seen him that morning, in the absurd overalls that were all too wide; hot and grimy, working away at the lowest, coarsest part of the business, yet blithe and happy in service. 'How long does it take to learn?' he had sung out in his clear, well-modulated voice, the voice his father affected to scorn and was so proud of.

'How long? They used to say seven years for a 'prentice.'

'Seven years? A devil of a time,' Rod had answered, but his eyes were dancing.

And now an unwelcome thought had come to the father. Like Jacob of old, Rodney would cheerfully have served seven years for his wife; but supposing there was no promised wife at the end of them?

'I'll not go and try him too far,' the old man thought tenderly.

All this had passed through his mind close on Cecil's disclaimer. She would not go to see Rodney at work, and he had not really expected it.

"So," he said, "you are one of them that think to work with the hands means dishonouring them."

"Certainly not," Cecil returned briskly. She had had a momentary desperate fear lest, whether she would or no, he would carry her off to this terrible business. "Hands are intended for work. My contention is that the work should be suitable. Rodney's hands were made for drawing."

"There's sense in that, too," Jeremiah admitted. "As a matter of fact, I reckernised that when I started him in the architecture business."

She followed up her advantage.

"Is it fair then, when he has got over the first

drudgery, when he is beginning to make his way, is on the eve, perhaps, of a big success, to force him to throw it all over ? ”

“ Nay, that wouldn’t be at all fair, that wouldn’t.”

Cecil bent forward eagerly.

“ There now ! We agree after all.”

Jeremiah smiled in a way Cecil instinctively resented, and yet the old man’s smile was like Rodney’s.

“ It wouldn’t be fair,” he said, “ not if I’d forced him, it wouldn’t. But that’s just what I didn’t do. I did but tell him to choose—and Rod has chosen.”

Cecil breathed quickly.

“ All the same, *I* call it forcing him. Practically, you said to him, ‘ I cannot make you do this, but you are a beast if you don’t.’ ”

Jeremiah looked at her attentively. There was certainly more in this girl than he had at first supposed. He had expected sloppy protestations, perhaps tears. Yet Jeremiah Barrett was not often wrong in his summing up of a fellow-being.

“ Well put,” he answered. “ Yet that was not the way of it. Rodney’s a man, and I treated him as a man. He’d his free choice, as he wouldn’t have done had I let him think it would make me look upon him as less than a man if he didn’t choose as I wished him.”

“ Naturally, he would want to please you.” Cecil’s suggestion came as a lightning dart, provoking from Jeremiah the rumbling return :

“ I don’t say nothing about that. Me and Rod stand plain to one another, without any frillings.”

“ Then, why on earth has he done it ? ”

“ Before I answer that question I’ll beg leave to

put one to you. Did he ask your advice on the matter? "

" Yes—no, not exactly. He said he was going to—but then he wouldn't."

" Um-m——" By now Jeremiah had his hands deep in his pockets. For once, he was not jingling the coins. In her present raw-nerved condition Cecil must have protested aloud had he done it.

" And—why didn't he? "

" He said—well, he didn't want to burden me with the onus—he didn't want me to blame myself afterwards."

" That's Roddy all over. The boy's a gentleman, that's what he is, first and last. So he settled it right on his own? "

" As for that"—Cecil seldom considered before she spoke, even to save her own pride—"as it happens, he is not so self-reliant as you think; he didn't trust himself——"

" Dear me! I'm glad to know that. Seems I don't understand the boy yet, not altogether."

" Of course, he may not have meant to consult anybody, only he happened to see Linda——"

" The little blue-eyed girl, isn't it? "

" Linda Ray, my friend," Cecil said stiffly. " I did not mean to mention her, not that there is any harm in it—I chanced to be out, he was waiting for me, and Linda——"

" Her, wasn't it, as he met down in Cornwall? " His mouth was pursed, he was thinking. " And so he asked her advice, did he? "

" I don't know that he asked it, exactly."

" Anyhow, he got it," Jeremiah chuckled. " Good that for the little lady. And what did she advise? "

"If you knew her as well as I do," Cecil returned crossly, "you would not ask. Linda is incorrigibly romantic."

"Um-m. She told him to have nothing to do with Brassyshine?" And now he was jingling the coins in his pocket.

"I shouldn't call *that* romantic, but practical," Cecil returned with asperity.

Jeremiah gave an inaudible whistle.

"Linda's one of the people that are not content with sacrificing themselves but want others to sacrifice *themselves*. That's horribly muddly—but you see what I mean, don't you?"

Jeremiah nodded his head like a big reflective baby. "She just wants them to get hold of the best."

"No, not at all. She wants the ideal for everyone."

"Isn't the ideal the best?"

"In a way I suppose it is. But it isn't practical."

"Practical or practicable?"

"Either or both." Cecil was flippant because she was not sure of his meaning.

"Am I to take it that the little lady put her weight into the scale with Brassyshine?"

"I don't know that she had any weight, exactly. Of course, she is very young."

"And so sees clearly."

Cecil stared at the interruption, then went on :

"She's young—and—how was I going to put it? Oh! I know. I don't know, of course, what she said, because she didn't tell me. But it was after she had been talking to him that she said she was certain he would throw up his profession and stand by you. And I said that he wouldn't."

Jeremiah caressed his wet hair sheaf.

"Seems the little lady knew what she was talking about."

Cecil flung herself into a different position.

"A bit hard on me." It struck Jeremiah how quickly her face aged when she looked ill-tempered.

"A bit hard on me that what *I* said should be ignored, and what *she* said followed."

"Only, as like as not," the old man said soothingly, "because it jumped with the boy's own intention."

"I see. Yes, no doubt that was it!" Cecil was graciously pleased to be mollified. And, with a vague feeling that in some mysterious way Rodney's father was on her side, she added: "And now I want to ask you a favour."

"Right ho!" he answered.

"Will you promise to grant it?"

"As to that, I never yet bought 'a pig in a poke,' young lady."

"It is this way, now that you have tested Rodney——"

Under his thick skin old Barrett coloured. There was certainly more shrewdness than he had bargained for in young madam.

"Now you have tested him, will you let him off his bargain?" Suddenly she turned the artillery of her eyes upon him. "You don't want him to sacrifice himself, do you? And there is nothing wrong with the business, really?"

Almost he was vanquished; but he felt the coins in his pockets, good coins, the palpable outcome of the trusty Brassyshine, the touch hardened and heartened him.

"You jump to conclusions very nimbly," he said; "but supposing I did not do this, as you say, to test Rodney."

"But you did, you must own it," she insisted.

"Nay, then—that I did not." He answered with genuine assurance; for, by now, he knew clearly that for him his son had needed no testing; it was for Rodney's own sake he had done this thing, that the girl of his choice might appear in her true colours—the colours which, he judged, were like herself, meretricious—or, as he put it, with 'no wash and wear about 'em.'

"Nay, that I did not," he repeated.

Cecil stared at him. Had she been wrong or was he deceiving her? She wanted to think so, but could not. Vulgar as he was, hateful almost in his self-satisfied assurance, she could not prevail on herself to think he was lying.

With a sigh she rose to her feet, gathering her possessions about her.

Jeremiah remained seated.

She could have stamped her foot at the blatant ungentlemanliness of Rodney's father. She restrained herself and took a dramatic pose.

"Very well. It only remains to tell you, as I have told your son already. Seeing that, in a matter to me of vital importance, he has not given in to my wishes, the engagement must be at an end between us." She was pleased with the tone of her voice, her attitude—everything. It was a little disappointing, therefore, that her audience of one remained unshaken. As old Barrett leant forward in his chair she almost thought he was smiling, or trying not to smile, which was even more hateful.

"And what did the boy say to that?" he asked quite pleasantly.

"Rodney?—He said nothing."

"Then I say nothing."

"Is it nothing to you?"—her air was that of a quite good tragedy queen; Jeremiah was amused at it—"is it nothing to you whether I marry your son or do not marry him?"

"There is only one thing that matters to me." His mouth still had that faint suggestion of a smile. It was annoying, but a fact, Jeremiah's smile *was* like Rodney's. "The only thing that really matters to me is whether the boy will be happy."

"You think," her voice sounded stifled, "that he can—be happy—without *me*?"

At that the old man sobered; the thing might have gone deeper with this child than he had thought, so he answered her gravely:

"Are you thinking of his happiness, or your own?"

"As for that—I can be happy enough without him. He is not the only——" In the old man's eyes, bright and dark, she read an unwelcome truth. She it was, not he, that was vulgar. Hastily she throttled the suggestion; but she altered her sentence. "He is the only one you need consider."

"Thank you, my dear young lady"—the smile again hovered—"and that simplifies matters, don't it? I have been thinking a deal about the boy lately. Nowt else, 'Mamma' would tell you; tossing and turning about, keeping her wakeful."

Sometimes Cecil thought this horrible old man took a malicious pleasure in his vulgarity.

He went on serenely:

"And what is the outcome of this here thinking?"

Something as follows: for a man to be right and happy his wife must be ready to help him——”

“I would have”—Cecil put in hurriedly—“I could have introduced—oh! heaps of people—the best sort—and *everyone* always says that is *everything* to an architect.”

Jeremiah waited patiently for her to finish, he did not always fail in good manners; then he went on, much as though he had been keeping his place with his finger:

“A help to him, that’s what a wife’s meant for. We’re rough things, at the best, us men, even the most polished of us. To lead us up, not draw us down, that’s woman’s true work with us. Now I take it that a woman as tries to persuade a man to do summat as the gorge of his better self rises at, she ain’t fit to help him, nor like to, nohows. But the woman as loves him too true to see his worse self leap on the back of his better; and draws him, even against her own interests—that’s the right sort of mate for him. I’m not saying as you’ve done one or the other with Rodney, I’m stating the case, as the lawyer chaps put it.”

Cecil read more in his words than he meant, for he had not been thinking of Linda, and her jealousy flaming, she broke out, unrestrainedly:

“As for that, if you, or Rodney, think Linda Ray is more suitable, more *worthy* your son than I am—she is jolly welcome. For my part, I have done with him.” Her voice trailed down from proud certainty to piteous realisation.

Jeremiah’s shrewd eyes were on her. And Cecil realised the thing which always she would remember most plainly in the whole bitter business—the fact

that Jeremiah Baret of Brassyshine notoriety, the self-made man, coin-jingling, rasping of voice, awkward in speech and manner, had found in her—Cecil Wolney—the Wolneys had been well bred for generations—something common, perhaps even vulgar. She had seen it in his eyes. She hated him for it. She hated Rodney, too, at the moment.

CHAPTER XXII

THE HERO RECEIVES HIS DISMISSAL

"If you please, Miss Ray, Miss Cecil would like to speak to you."

Linda stared at the maid who stood in her doorway. The formality was so unsuggestive of Cecil, who raced over the house, bursting in on anyone, at any moment, without thought of apology.

"She wants me," Linda faltered; "where is she?" She had a cold presage of some dread happening. The thing was so unlike Cecil. "Where is she?" She would not have been surprised at some such answer as 'They are carrying her in now'; instead, came the commonplace intimation:

"In the morning-room, Miss." The morning-room was the household name for Cecil's sanctum.

Linda went there, hastily, not waiting to tidy mind or person, still obsessed with the idea that something important, even terrible, must have happened.

An unnatural stillness reigned in the room, seeming to emanate from Cecil herself. She was on the window seat, her face, though in tone against the light, seemed to have taken on a certain hardness. With a throb of the heart, Linda realised this was not the Cecil of her girlish adoration.

"You wanted me," she said, hesitating.

"Yes. Come here." Cecil's tone was constrained, yet not exactly unfriendly. Linda's heart leapt to the thought that she was still necessary to Cecil.

She sat down beside her. The day was dull and oppressive. The flowers in the window-box looked assertively garish against the universal greyness.

"I just want you to know"—Cecil's words came as slowly and deliberately as her slim fingers moved sideways over the gay brocade of the window-cushion—"I just want you to know that I have broken off my engagement with Rodney Barrett."

"Cecil! you mustn't!"

"Why not?" Cecil turned sharply upon her.

Linda flushed, stammered:

"You wouldn't have the heart—you couldn't—to make him so unhappy."

"I have," Cecil said shortly. "After all, who is he that everyone should think so much of his happiness?"

"Does everyone?"

"Of course they do. Roddy's happiness, that's what I'm out after. There you have old Brassy-shine——"

"And isn't it natural in his father?"

"I hate natural things, 'natural' so often means 'nasty.' Then there's his genteel mother. The word 'genteel' has survived from Victorian times for the sole purpose of expressing Mrs. Barrett. She sucks up to me, because she thinks I'm going to make her dear Rodney happy. Little she knows! His sister dislikes me——" She silenced Linda's embryo disclaimer. "She does. And why? I don't believe there's anything really dislikable

about me, it is only that she thinks I shall somehow fail to make the inestimable Rodney truly happy. She's clever enough to see that I have too much strength of character, and he too little."

"No—I mean, he hasn't."

"That's where you are wrong, my dear. I always knew he was weak and yielding. I did not mind at first. I wanted him to yield to me in everything. He told me afterwards he never meant to ask me a second time—weak people are often obstinate—but I simply made him. It wasn't altogether selfish of me either. I knew"—she gulped—"at any rate I thought—I could make him happy."

Linda's eyes shone.

"So you are as bad as anybody."

"How?"

"In wanting his happiness."

"No, I'm not. I did then, because I thought it would make me happy."

"I see. Yourself first." Linda's voice hardened.

"Myself first, naturally. In that respect I am no different from anyone else, except that I have the courage to say so. Everyone is first with themselves. Babies and idiots show it, and old people *when* they get childish. The rest make a pretence. So silly when everyone knows it. You, now——" She turned on Linda with triumph. "At the bottom of your heart, isn't it just your own happiness you are seeking?"

"No." Linda's voice was low, and there was a thrill in it.

Cecil turned away jerkily.

"It is simply that you deceive yourself, or you won't own it."

"It would not be true if I said so."

"You—you are a sort of saint with an invisible halo. Anyway, you can't say it is my happiness you are thinking of. No fear! No one thinks of *my* happiness. That's what makes it all so hard, so disappointing. After all, it is not asking so very much, surely, that the man you are engaged to should think of your happiness, only——"

"But—would it really make you happy that he should be less than himself to please your passing fancy?"

"It isn't a passing fancy. It is a matter of the utmost importance. I don't mind marrying an architect. I'm not really snobbish and stupid—but I won't—I simply *won't*—marry Barrett's Brassy-shine."

"It doesn't seem to me—of course, I don't know very much——"

"You don't know anything," snapped Cecil.

"Not much of the world at any rate." Linda's colour was rising. "But it seems to me—if—if you—cared for a man—it wouldn't make any difference, whether he sat on the throne or worked in the humblest way for his living."

"Not when it comes to overalls—*ill-fitting* overalls—and 'in a muck-sweat,' as my would-be father-in-law put it so prettily?"

Linda paled.

"But—has he to?—will he?"

"He's up to his eyes in Brassyshine at this moment. Now what do you think of your hero?"

"If you mean Rodney Barrett"—Linda spoke steadily—"I think he is splendid."

"Well, I don't then. I take life as it is, without any gush or sentiment. I have made a mistake, I own it, over this engagement. After all, a girl's pretty helpless. How does she know anything of a man or his belongings till he has proposed to her? It's a pretty rotten system, anyway. What chance do you get of knowing a man, really?"

All in a moment the grey outlook from Cecil's window faded for Linda, the complacent, too-highly-complexioned flowers went, taking Cecil, excusing and accusing, with them. In their place was the shimmer of Cornish waters heaving into the sunshine, and a man's head sunburnt and hatless against it.

"Why do you look so?" Cecil's voice broke out loudly—it seemed too loudly.

"How?—Was I?"

Cecil shivered.

"You looked so rum for a moment. As though you were seeing things. You don't suffer from second-sight or anything, do you?"

Linda tried to laugh as she said:

"I was only thinking."

"Please don't think if it affects you that way," said Cecil. "What were we saying? Oh! about Rodney. I've written to release him." She offered a letter that she had been sitting on. "Here, read it."

Linda did not like the expression of her eyes, which were dancing maliciously.

"Oh no. I couldn't. I would rather not, really."

"But I want you to. You must," Cecil insisted. She drew out the letter and, unfolding it, placed it on

Linda's knees. Against her will, Linda could not help glancing at the big sprawling writing.

"DEAR RODNEY,

"Since your love for me is so little you have done what I did not want you to, I have come to the conclusion that I don't care one way or the other.

CECIL.

"P.S.—You will understand by this that the engagement is broken."

Cecil laid a finger on the postscript.

"Men are so dense, you can't put things too plainly. Well, and what do you think of it?"

Linda folded the letter and, as though it were an unclean thing, thrust it back at Cecil hastily. It almost seemed to her that she could see Rodney's face when he would read it—his face, with all the boyish light killed out of it.

"You don't mean to send it?" she said in a stifled voice. "You are not cruel, Cecil."

"Sometimes I think I am," the other said moodily. "I know I take a horrid sort of pleasure in reading about accidents or misfortunes; and with illnesses and operations I always have a morbid sort of hope that the poor things won't get better. I believe I am cruel. Lots of people are like that, really, only they wouldn't own it. I wouldn't to everybody."

"You wouldn't to Rodney," Linda said quite fiercely.

A wave of colour blotted out Cecil's fairness.

"I believe," she said, "I have not been really true to Rodney. I have tried to show myself better than

I am. And this"—she waved the note scornfully—"is where it has led me. To tell you the truth, Linda, I am glad to be rid of the strain of pretending. I am not good, really—at least, not the sort of good I was trying to seem to Rodney. I am right enough on my own level where too much is not expected of me. The sort that would be all right, for instance, with a man like Monty Craig. He's not a bit clever, and as for goodness—I suppose he's just ordinary—a gentleman and so forth—anyone would be at their ease with Monty. *He* wouldn't expect anything special of you."

"Cecil, you talk, almost, as though you might—care—for Mr. Craig."

"*Care!* If you mean—you prudish small thing—*love* by your *care*, then I don't *care* for Monty. All the same, don't be surprised if you hear some time that I'm engaged to him."

Linda sprang up and away.

"You are talking sheer nonsense, and I'm not going to listen to you."

"It seems to me"—Cecil was turning her envelope over and over, looking down at it reflectively—"it seems to me only now that I am beginning to be sensible. Who was the old Jossier that said, 'Know thyself'? Well, I fancy, I am just beginning to know myself, without—as old Brassyshine would say—'any frillings.' I am not the sort to be happy without means and position. And that's not so selfish as it sounds, because unless I am happy I should be perfectly horrid. I really should, Linda, and then how on earth could my husband be happy? No, I am not cut out for anything high-falutin. They talk about women loving self-sacrifice; if

that is so, I am not a normal woman. I don't want sacrifice—my own or anyone else's."

"Yet you asked a great sacrifice of—him." Linda's throat hurt her, but she had to say it.

"That's where you are quite wrong. I asked him to give up the sacrifice. But he would not. Of course, I don't know, he may have had a secret hankering all the while after the business. According to his father, he seemed pretty cheery in the midst of it."

"Was he?" Linda's eyes brightened. "I am so glad. I'd pictured him wretched."

"Linda, my child," Cecil said sententiously, "take my advice, don't let that active imagination of yours run away with you."

Linda bit her lip.

"Surely I can be reasonably glad that—someone I know—is not unhappy."

Cecil gave a quick comprehensive glance; then she went on toying with the envelope, whilst her mind worked rapidly. This, that she was throwing aside, was it, after all, so worthless? she pondered. With a smile of self-approbation she drew her tongue along the flap of the envelope and sealed it. Then she stretched and yawned.

"Let's go to the Coliseum, or somewhere," she said. "I've a sick longing for some amusement."

Linda gazed at the sealed letter almost as though it held an explosive.

"You are not going to post *that*, are you?"

"Oh, yes, I am—or rather"—Cecil laughed out maliciously—"I'll get you to do it for me."

"Indeed I shall not," Linda flared out stormily.

"I don't know what has come to you, Cecil. I used

to love you—but *now*——” She checked herself suddenly, and hurried out of the room.

Without any comment Cecil picked up the morning's paper and ran her eye down the list of *Matinées*.

CHAPTER XXIII

IN THE HERO'S ABSENCE

LINDA refused point-blank to go to the Coliseum. Cecil scoffed at her mental attitude.

"To look at you one would think it was a funeral. A broken engagement is nothing. I know girls who've been engaged two or three times and think nothing of it. Not that I mind about it. If you won't come, there are plenty of people who will."

This plenty, as, perhaps, all along she had intended, resolved itself into only one; Montague Craig was more than ready to be her escort.

There were one or two 'turns' quite worth seeing. Monty decidedly approved of the Russian ballet; and the performing dogs took Cecil's fancy, especially the fox-terrier in a crinoline who played the part of 'Bunty.' When the stage failed to interest, their box was quite a good place in which to sit back and talk; on account of the music and clapping it was necessary to sit rather closely together; but Cecil was pleasantly conscious that the pink and white of her complexion could have stood an even closer scrutiny than that afforded by Monty's monocle, even had she not, before now, dragged from him the admission that it was only a plain-glass deception.

In a spirit of bravado the girl had dressed herself with more than her usual care, and Monty's eyes—they were a pale brown and much less critical than Rodney's dark grey ones—expressed undisguised approval.

Conversation, to give it so dignified a name, was flipped backwards and forwards between them till, apropos of something or nothing, Cecil found herself being questioned :

"By the way, what have you done with Roddy Barrett? Have you spirited him away somewhere? I've dug up all his usual haunts and drawn blank every time. What have you done with him?"

"I? Nothing."

"Where is he, then?"

"Haven't you heard? He has set himself to brighten the world."

"You speak in riddles. It is a dull old world. How does he intend to accomplish the impossible?"

"By the aid of Brassyshine."

Monty fixed his glass. He had really come to think he could see better through it.

"You don't say so. That's the stuff, isn't it? The old man has made his bit out of it. Is Rod out after money, too?"

"How can I tell?" She kept an admirable countenance.

Monty looked puzzled.

"I say, though, doesn't he let you into his secrets?"

"Why ever should he?"

Monty coloured.

"I don't know. I mean—stop me if I'm saying

anything I ought not—but I understood—I'm sure somebody told me——”

“As usual, somebody told you wrong then.” Cecil's laugh was delightfully careless.

Monty fingered his small bristling moustache.

“Could have sworn it was Rod himself,” he said *sotto voce*.

She opened her shot-silk theatre-bag and carefully selected a chocolate.

“Have one of these, they're liqueurs. No? Go on. It's really amusing. May I hear what Rodney Barrett told you? Stop me if I'm saying anything I ought not to.”

“Oh no, it's all the other way. And, now I think of it”—he lied manfully—“it couldn't have been Rod—old Bob it might have been.”

“Bob Hendrey? Little guinea-pig man with light eyelashes?”

“Yes. Do you know him?”

“I've met him. What did he tell you?”

“He, or someone else. I wouldn't like to swear to it. And I'm dashed if I'll ever believe anything anyone tells me again.”

“But you'll believe *me*?”

“Of course, I'll believe *you*.” He put so much expression for once into his calmly good-looking face that the eye-glass deserted its post. Whilst he was looking for it Cecil took the opportunity of assuring him, without meeting his eyes:

“You'll believe me when I tell you there is not an atom of truth in what Bob Hendrey or anyone else told you.”

“You mean—er—that—er—you are not——?”

“Most decidedly, I am not.”

“ And Roddy ? ”

“ Naturally, he isn't either.”

“ By Jove ! ”—Monty readjusted his recovered glass and stared down at her solemnly—“ by Jove, you do take a chap's breath away, Miss Wolney ! ”

“ You believed it then ? ” She lowered her voice and her eyelids, and the glance she threw him was reproachful.

He took out a coloured silk handkerchief and polished his monocle. With a thrill of delight Cecil realised his fingers were trembling.

Down below them on the stage a stoutish woman in a preposterous burlesque of hunting-clothes carried out in velvet and satin, was tapping her polished boots with a parody of a hunting-crop and singing something about ‘ the dogs ’ with a chorus of ‘ Bow-wow-wow.’ To Cecil's ears it sounded far off and meaningless ; whilst it is doubtful whether Monty Craig, busily polishing his monocle, heard it at all. His thoughts, which as a rule floated gently on a sleepy current, seemed to be rushing rapidly over a weir ; he made an effort at steadiness, but they were fast carrying him away.

“ You did not believe it ? ” Cecil slightly altered her question.

“ Well—now I come to think of it, I don't believe I did. Though, of course, in a way I had to. And yet I don't know. Rod's one in a thousand, but—it doesn't matter now, my saying it—the old man's a bit off—what ? ”

“ He's simply awful. Not that ”—she composed her voice to a sweet gravity—“ I should have taken that into account, if I had——”

"Of course not, naturally. I didn't suggest that, did I? Jove—the whole thing!" He fixed his glass once more and looked at her admiringly.

She turned her head away, fixing unseeing eyes on the satin-clad lady who, to an ever-increasing cataract of applause, was still beating her boots and leading the chorus of 'Bow-wow-wow.'

Monty drew his chair a little nearer. The noise rising from the stage and roaring out from the auditorium justified the movement.

"Look here"—he set his face firmly, perhaps only to keep the wayward monocle in place—"you don't—er—I suppose—object to engagements—on—er—principle——?"

"Why should I? Between the right people, of course. But the way they go and settle two people together if they happen to be at all pally—it's enough to make them hate one another. It is really."

He nodded. He did not want to lose the thread of what he'd made up his mind to say to her.

"Jolly stupid," he blurted out; "no ground for it, or anything—fact is—I don't suppose you would though—I can't see why you should. But I'd like it most awfully."

"Like what? I really don't understand."

Monty smiled—quite an ordinary smile, it hadn't the charm of Rodney's.

"I bet you do understand," he told her.

"No, *really*. Do tell."

"Only—*that*—couldn't we?"

"Is it a guessing game?" Cecil asked teasingly.

"Couldn't we—you and I—what they were saying—only *really*?"

"You mean, be engaged." Cecil spoke with sudden gravity.

"You've got it."

She sat for a moment in silence. A little air-pocket of silence that shut away from them the babel of stage orchestra and the thousand-seated building.

"Won't you?" Monty said earnestly.

"Would it make you happy?"

"Try me," he returned emphatically.

"I believe I have half a mind to."

He bent nearer.

She drew away.

"Not now, not here. Come this evening. Of course, there's father and mother."

He fingered his lip bristles.

"You don't think they'll——"

"I don't see"—she glanced at him under her lashes—"that they *can* have any objection." Her heart was beating hard, her brain working quickly. 'I'll have to prepare them,' she thought; 'mother'll like it, I know, but father will get talking of honour.' Once again she felt the sick sensation she had experienced when she saw herself through the eyes of old 'Brassyshine.' Then she set her lips. She would have to go through with it, for beyond, it seemed to her, stretched peaceful tracts of undisturbed happiness.

"We'll go now," she said, rising. Looking at him with the critical eyes of possession, she told herself, 'He is bigger than Rodney; ever so much better-looking.' But she could not rid herself of the impression that from the box-shadows she could see Rodney's eyes grey-looking and questioning:

'Have you, a Wolney, treated me—Barett that I am—quite fairly?'

She tried to rid herself of the thought that at that very moment he might be reading her letter.

CHAPTER XXIV

AN EVERYDAY LIGHT ON THE HERO

LINDA had no idea what she ought to do next. It never occurred to her that there was no need to do anything. When you are young you must do something. It takes many years to learn that you, individually, are of very little importance; that, mostly, things will go on their way much the same, with or without you. Linda did not magnify her own importance; in fact, she was inclined to minimise it, giving herself credit for less strength of character than she, in truth, possessed. Of late, her mental growth had been rapid, and with mental as with physical growth rapidity involves a sense of lassitude.

"I wish I knew what I ought to do. I am sure I ought to do something."

So Linda beat herself against the wall of Cecil's recent decision. Only one thing seemed certain. This crushing blow must not fall on Rodney. Yet, how was it to be prevented? To appeal to Cecil when in one of her hard, flippant moods would be worse than useless. Besides, there was little doubt that the fatal letter was already posted.

Linda groaned aloud as she fancied the hurt look in Rodney's eyes as he read it. She had never seen him look hurt, not for himself; but she knew he

felt deeply, because of that soul-searing time when he had looked at her with a sort of pity. That did not bear thinking of, ought not to be thought of, because, of course, Rodney was mistaken. She hurried her thoughts away from that point as an anxious mother her children from the edge of a precipice.

She paced up and down her room half conscious that was the correct thing to do, half driven by restless necessity. She was anxious, uneasy, ashamed of her lack of self-reliance, for always she had wanted to be strong, had, indeed, fancied her character a strong one, until she came to lean on it.

To make matters more intolerable, there was no one to talk to, no one, that is, who could help her. Cecil's mother was quite kind, but outside the barrier. Cecil's father was meant only for gay times, with his pleasant, inconsequent teasing.

Aunt Emma? Not for the first time her thoughts flickered about a hasty return to Aunt Emma. But they drew away. Aunt Emma would not understand, Linda decided; giving no admission to one self-willed thought that suggested Aunt Emma might understand all too clearly.

Who else was there? One by one she dismissed a number of casual acquaintances, lingering for a moment now and again over a face that looked sympathetic, a face that might have helped had acquaintance had time to give birth to friendship.

She lingered longest over the thought of Edith Barrett, went on with a sigh, returned and lingered again, half reluctantly finding in herself a growing resolution. Edith would certainly see things from a sane outlook. She was not a petty woman. She

would speak out plainly without any prevarication. Besides, she was Rodney's sister.

By the time Linda had reached the Victorian house she was sick with apprehension lest Edith should be out or unable to see her.

Miss Baret was at home. The 'Suffragan Bishop' seemed almost worthy a halo as he admitted it. Instead of mounting the broad staircase with the highly varnished banister, he conducted Linda through a maze of ground-floor passages and ushered her into a little white room.

"Miss Edith's own," he unbent to inform her. "She is in, and if you'll take a seat I'll let her know you are waiting."

Almost at once Linda felt a sense of ease and refreshment. This was not a Victorian room, the thought struck her directly. If it belonged at all to the Victorian house, she thought whimsically, then it cast back to some forgotten ancestor. The white-washed, or white-papered, walls gave the effect of open-air daylight. Here and there delicate foliage sprays or the beauty of a few long-stalked blossoms stood out against the whiteness, their shadows softening any effect of harshness. There were no pictures. The floor was polished, with one dull red rug on it. The window, set rather high in the wall, was long and small-paned; there were no curtains, but a white frill ran along the top of it; there were black oak chairs, and a writing-desk stood near the window, which gave on to a tiny square of courtyard, just now vivid with the pink of clambering roses.

"I am so glad you like my room." Edith's voice came from behind Linda suddenly. "As a matter of fact, I converted it out of a scullery. The windows

were of corrugated glass, and the roses outside were wasted."

"I do like it," Linda returned enthusiastically; "it reminds me of a sweet old lady, restful and gracious."

They sat down near the window. Edith was in a white dress, which accentuated her rich colouring and laid flakes of brilliant light against the shadowed white of the wall behind her.

"I am so glad, too"—Edith rested her arms on her desk and leant towards Linda—"that you like me."

"How did you know?" Linda was half pleased, half puzzled.

"You would not be here, unless. It will save time if we are straight with one another. Of course, I can see you are in trouble, and I shall be so glad if I can help you."

Linda flushed hotly.

"I am in trouble," she owned, "but not on my own account."

"I knew that," Edith said quietly.

"It is someone else I am worried about," Linda went on rapidly, lest she should lose courage. "The worst is, I am not at all sure that I ought to speak, even to you, about it."

"That is a point only you can decide." After that Edith sat quite still, looking out of the window. There was no embarrassment to Linda in her silence. On the contrary, in this peaceful white room from which the noisy town beyond seemed absolutely excluded silence became the apt thing till, without haste, speech was ready to enter.

"It is this way," Linda said at last, fixing her earnest blue eyes on Edith, "a great wrong has been,

or is going to be, done. I don't know how to—yet I feel I ought to prevent it."

"You are quite sure it is a wrong?" Edith asked quietly.

"There is no doubt about that. And the one who is doing it will be just as unhappy as the one to whom it is done. Yet I don't know how to prevent it. And they might have been so happy!"

Edith was silent, with an understanding silence that caused Linda to draw her breath more freely as she went on:

"I don't see the harm, seeing you are his sister, of telling, what no doubt you have guessed, that it is about—him and Cecil."

Edith nodded. "Things are not right between them?"

"Cecil is my friend, my very great friend," Linda said with hasty assurance.

"You are loyal to her."

"That is it. I want her——" Her eyes deepened almost to blackness. "I can't bear her to be unworthy of herself."

"Of herself as you have conceived her?"

"That is herself."

"Isn't it rather hard on her?"

"Hard?—How?"

"It isn't her fault, is it, if she fails to act up to the ideal you have created around her."

"I haven't. I know—of course I know—Cecil isn't perfection——"

"It is only lately, though, that you have admitted it."

"I suppose I would have liked her perfect," Linda owned rather sadly.

"She was not responsible though for your wishes. We have to take our friends as they are, and love them, if we love them at all, the more for their humanity. You must not ask Cecil Wolney to act according to the convictions of Linda Ray."

"That would be stupid."

"Yet that is just what you are doing."

"Life seems to get more and more difficult."

"It wouldn't be worth living otherwise," said Edith.

"You are so strong," Linda burst out petulantly, "I am not, and Cecil isn't. Poor Cecil, you must not expect her to be like you are."

Edith smiled.

"Now you are turning my own weapon on me. But I am unscathed, for the very good reason that it is unloaded. I do not expect from Cecil Wolney more than I find in her. She is a pretty girl when she is amiable, an amiable one as long as she knows she is pretty; good-natured as long as it involves no self-sacrifice, self-sacrificing just far enough to show off her good nature. Those that love her, she loves—more or less. As for those who dislike her—she ignores them. But the key, as I see it, to her character is her greed for power. She likes flattery, but you would flatter her more by yielding to her than by praising her. She wants to possess things—love, friendship, whatever it may be—not for their intrinsic value, but for the sense of possession. There are many women of the type, and most of them lack one thing—a delicate sense of honour. Have I drawn her portrait fairly?"

"No, indeed," Linda hotly protested. "You do not know Cecil a bit. She is not like that, really.

Your portrait is no more like Cecil than is Rubelow's pastel of her."

"Rubelow is said to be a good judge of character."

"Not in this case. And you misjudge her equally. She likes love and flattery no more than we all do. She is affectionate, though you may not have had any opportunity of finding that out. She is always sorry afterwards when she has hurt you. And it is as much for her sake as his that I don't want her to hurt—your brother."

Edith nodded.

"I see. So that is the trouble."

Linda's cheeks flamed, her lips quivered.

"Perhaps I, too, have not what you mean by a delicate sense of honour; I should not have come to you about it. But I have come to you because I am desperate. Something must be done, and I feel utterly helpless. Has he told you anything about it? No—I ought not to ask that question."

Edith turned, clear-eyed.

"Rodney and I do not have many secrets. I certainly knew matters were likely to be strained between him and Miss Wolney when he made up his mind to come to the help of my father. All the same, do you think he could have done otherwise?"

"I don't, of course not."

"But——"

Linda flushed. "Cecil was hurt that he would not do as she wanted."

"*Could* not." There was a bright point of colour on Edith's cheeks. Her eyes sparkled. "We must remember Rodney has what we women so often lack, that which my father possesses so pre-eminently—a keen sense of honour. You would not have Rodney

—after all my father has done for him, for all of us—you would not expect him to turn his back in the day of trouble? ” Her low voice thrilled.

“ No, indeed,” Linda readily responded. Then added rather sadly, “ It is not me, though, you have to persuade, but Cecil.”

“ Do you think she will allow herself to be persuaded? ”

Linda was troubled. “ At present, I am afraid she has broken off the engagement.”

Edith drew in her underlip sharply. She might not say what she thought. Linda was the first girl she had come near to loving, and Cecil Wolney was dear to Linda Ray. Linda evidently saw Cecil from some unexplainable point of view; Edith tried to be just, broadminded; but her heart was against Cecil, and running like hot blood through her head was the thought, ‘ How will Rodney take it? ’ All along she had known a pin-prick of doubt as to Rodney’s happiness in this engagement, and had tried to ignore it, persisting to herself that it arose only from her own clumsy handling of the delicate fabric of another’s inner self.

“ I don’t know what to think,” she said at last, gravely.

“ And you—you are so strong.” The note in Linda’s voice was appealing.

“ I wish I were,” Edith said rather sadly. “ To be strong to bear is comparatively easy of attainment; it is active strength, the strength that decides, that is wanting in most of us. In this particular case I cannot see that we can do anything.”

“ Could not you speak to Cecil? ”

"She would only harden her heart. Unfortunately, she dislikes me."

"She thinks you dislike her."

"There she is mistaken. I have no reason to dislike Cecil Wolney."

"Do you always have a reason for your likes and dislikes?"

"Don't you? Without reason they blow hither and thither like paper in a wind."

"And *with* reason?"

"As moving clouds, they show us the set of the weather."

"To me they seem more like the taste and smell of things, telling us which are wholesome or harmful."

"Poisonous berries are sometimes sweet, and the smell of cabbage is unpleasing."

"After all," Linda considered, "analogies do not prove anything."

"You are right. Though, like flowers, one is tempted to gather them."

This by-play had answered Edith's purpose. The lace at Linda's throat was not rising and falling so jerkily.

"To return on our tracks," said Linda quite easily, "what would you advise me to do?"

"I would advise the hardest of all things, that you do nothing."

"That seems so cowardly."

Edith smiled. "When it is the hardest of all things?"

"But to stand by and see someone unhappy——"

"Is sometimes the sublimest test of love and

courage. My dear, my dear"—she bent forward, her bright eyes had softened—"don't you believe *I* care that Rodney must suffer. I have known him all my life. What," she asked fiercely, "does Cecil Wolney, or anyone, know of him, compared with what I do? It is hard, hard"—her proud mouth twitched—"that Rodney should be the one to suffer. Yet, there is this—it may be the making of him. And, at all events, it is better his pride should suffer now than his heart later."

"Why not his heart now?"

"Because," Edith said firmly, "I believe his heart is not involved at present."

"You mean that he does not—care for Cecil?"

"He does care for her, but not as he is capable of caring. Not as he will care some day."

The white-walled room, with its outlook of roses, was destined to linger in Linda's mind with a sense of peace and uplifting of spirits.

CHAPTER XXV

STILL THE TALK IS OF THE HERO

EDITH sought her father. The talk in the white-walled room had wearied her; paying the price of Linda's lightened burden, she suffered a sense of lassitude as the result of the virtue that had gone out of her.

Jeremiah was in his study enjoying a pipe and looking round on his glossy-backed books with a sense of satisfaction. He liked to soak himself in the thought of all the wisdom and beauty stored in them—his to use when the humour should take him. Though he read his books seldom, in his library he found an unending source of contented enjoyment.

He turned as Edith entered and held out a coarse, stubbed hand affectionately.

"I've just been calculating," his voice chortled richly, "that, reading two books a week, it would take me five years, three months, one week and a half to get through the lot of 'em. When I'm old and retire from business, I mean to begin at the corner of the top shelf there by the window and go right through, steadily."

"What an awful idea!" said Edith.

"No—is it?"

"To me. I could never make rules about books,

far less keep them. My mood would be bound to clash with the book of the moment."

He rubbed his chin.

"There's something in that, there is, too. I never thought of that. Books are a bit like people—you feel sort of set against certain ones sometimes. No matter. The time is far enough off before I'll be retiring."

"Meanwhile, you can go on enjoying your books at random, which is the proper way with old as well as new friends and acquaintances." She sat herself down on his chair arm.

"What is it?" he asked. "You are worried."

"I am. Father, are you satisfied as to how your plan is working?"

"Aye!—I am that. It has brought out the gold in the boy. He's buckled to like a right good 'un."

"Yes; but about his engagement?"

"It isn't going to bear the strain of it, Edith. We have had a bit of talk, me and young madam. She's more in her, too, than I thought for."

"You don't think the engagement will hold?"

"Nay. There's not enough grit in her. A fair-weather maid she is; right enough for pleasure sailing, but—the first puff of a storm——" He shrugged his fat shoulders and plunged his hands deep in his pockets. "Nay. The lad must do better'n that for himself, must our Roddy. Another thing I've fathomed. She don't care about *him*, not even so much as she *is* capable of. It's my belief the only thing that riles her in letting him go is a bit o' jealousy. Like enough you can guess just who's she jealous of, Edith?"

"Linda Ray has only just left me," Edith said thoughtfully.

Jeremiah looked down at his carpet slippers intently.

"Say—you don't think—you women can pick up a scent of the sort a deal quicker than men—do you think she'd have had him? I mean, if there hadn't been the other."

Edith flushed.

"As for that, I know nothing and I don't mean to guess."

"There were those letters the lad wrote from Cornwall. And when he came back, I won't deny I said summat or other 'bout him having been after Miss Wolney—not teasing-like but talking straight as one man to another. And Rodney, he says, 'I suppose we all make mistakes; false starts, anyway.' Aye! that's how he put it—'false starts.' And then he looks up with his eyes shining, so as to make me feel young again to see them, and he says, 'Later, we are glad enough they led nowhere.' Then he laughed and looked ever so happy. I dunno as I've seen Rod look happy like that, not since he was engaged, I haven't. That is, lest it was in the Works this very morning. You'd have fair laughed, you would that, Edith, an' you'd seen him, all of a muck and as gay as sunshine. He frames well, too, the boy does."

"You don't mean, though, to let him go on with it?"

"Nay. But there's no harm done with his buckling to. In some ways it's a pity he shouldn't go on." The light died out of his face. "But then there'd be no call for all his schooling and the

'Varsity on top of it—not to make Brassyshine. Though this I will say, a man—supposing he *is* a man—is none the worse for education whatever he sets his hand to."

"You did very well without it."

"Me! I'm one in a hundred," he answered her coolly. "I'm the sort as gets on planted t'other side up or however you like. There aren't many like me. Rod, he's different, more finely drawn, he is. He needed all the advantages you could give him. And, Jove, he's had 'em."

He jingled his money complacently—the sound was music to Edith, emphasising, as it did for her, her father's content, his wide-spreading geniality.

"What I am wondering is how he will take it?" she said. "A broken engagement must give a hard rap to a man's vanity. It is as though the woman takes all she has accepted and flings it back at him, crying, 'It is not good enough.' At the best, it must be a great blow to his vanity."

"As for vanity, that'll bear a deal of knocking about—and be none the worse for it. Rod'll come out all right if it goes no deeper with him than vanity. It'll be a bit of a pruning for him; but he'll spring out all the fresher after it. The real thing as troubles me is whether young madam'll stick to it. Now, if she gets playing fast and loose with the boy, there's no telling how he may take it. He may feel bound, whether she does or no. Rod has just that nice sense of the right way of things.—Hullo! you, 'Mamma!' Come in! We're having a bit of a confab, Edith and me."

He rose from his chair till his wife was seated, and under cover of the movement managed to wink

at his daughter in a manner meant to convey, 'We must not let her know more than is good for her.'

Mrs. Barrett was all of a flutter.

“Oh! I've just heard. Of course, it may not be true. I'm sure I hope not. I know nowadays people are not nearly so particular. Chaperons, I mean, and so on—they tell me quite out of fashion. Though, myself, I can't see how they can be. An engaged girl, too. I'm not saying for a moment there's any truth in it.”

Whilst she spoke jerkily, but continuously, Mrs. Barrett had drawn off her gloves and was pulling them into shape, finger by finger, with deliberate exactitude, her action being the aftermath of those days when a new pair of gloves could, by an almost slavish consideration, be coaxed into remaining 'new' for a space of many months. She was handsomely dressed for 'calling.' That is, her clothes were handsome, but her body appeared to have slipped into them by accident and all the while to be apologising for its presence within them. Her hat was set on her head with mathematical precision when the creative mind of an ultra-expensive milliner had willed that it should be tilted. Under it, Mrs. Barrett looked from husband to daughter pathetically.

“It was Mrs. Blundell who told me. She was only just back from the Coliseum. Though I suppose *everyone* goes there now—even royalties. Still, in a box, just the two of them! She was absolutely certain—I specially asked the question—that no one whatever was with them. As a matter of fact, she was right opposite and couldn't, even if she wanted to, by any possibility be mistaken. They were

taking no notice, she said, of the performance, though, for that matter, it was very likely silly, even though it was not vulgar. They were talking away—and *their chairs close together!* Mrs. Blundell seemed so *sure!* I'm afraid she used opera-glasses, which we were always taught was not the thing—not where you know the people, though permissible, of course, with foreigners, and, under suitable conditions, with royalties. And they left—right in the middle of a song—she told me the name, but I have forgotten. I know she said they left in the *middle* of it."

"Who did?" asked Edith, trying to stay the tide of her mother's verbosity—"the royalties?"

"I don't think there were any; I think Mrs. Blundell would have said so, though she seemed quite taken up with observing Cecil—Cecil Wolney."

"Cecil Wolney was it?" said Edith, whilst her father nodded, "I thought so."

"Of course it was Cecil Wolney. There would have been no point in it otherwise. And who do you think was with her?"

"Not Rodney," Jeremiah said with a twinkle.

"Poor boy"—Mrs. Barrett looked doleful reproach—"you know he is shut up in those dreadful Works at this very moment. No, it wasn't Rodney, but a man named—Crag, was it? or Craigie, or something. He's immensely rich, so it seems; very good-looking; in fact, quite an eligible. Now what I say is——" She looked about with an air of suburban melodrama—"now what is an engaged girl doing alone with an eligible man of that sort? Mrs. Blundell, herself, put that to me. And really, I could find her no reasonable answer."

Edith's eyes met her father's. 'I suppose we must tell her,' they said. And his answered back, but dubiously, 'Yes, I suppose so.'

"The fact of it is, 'Mamma,'" he said aloud, "that is what we were talking about. We've just had information that Miss Wolney is not engaged at all at present."

"But—she is engaged to Rodney. He hasn't broken it off. Rodney wouldn't."

"She has though." The old man could scarcely repress a chuckle.

"The wicked, wicked girl." Mrs. Barrett's withered cheeks were flaming. "How dare she? She can't though—he wouldn't let her. She mustn't be allowed to. You don't mean that it's for this Crock man she's thrown him over? Why—it's an insult to all of us!"

"Insult or no, my dear, it seems we have to face the fact that she *has* thrown him over. Though we've no grounds to suppose—and it wouldn't be fair, either—that it is in favour of anyone in particular."

"It will just break the boy's heart." Mrs. Barrett clasped her hands tightly. "And she seemed such a nice gentle girl, and really clever at millinery." Then, with a sudden high note of tragedy—"Why," she asked, "has she done it? They can't have quarrelled. Rodney would never agree to quarrel."

Edith looked across at her father; he pursed his mouth and slightly moved his eyebrows as though he would say, 'Yes, you tell her.'

"As far as we know"—Edith's voice was sweet and clear after her mother's high-pitched excitement—"as far as we know, it is that Rodney has

displeased Cecil as regards father's business. She wanted him not to give up architecture."

"That was quite natural." Mrs. Barrett considered.

"As a matter of fact, she told him he must choose between her and the business."

"And Rod chose the business," her father put in triumphantly.

"I don't like to infer it of Rodney," said Mrs. Barrett, "but to me it seems—wasn't it rather ungentlemanly?"

"Not at all." Jeremiah and Edith spoke the words in duet. Then she waited for him, he raised his eyebrows, and she continued as solo:

"Don't you think father had the first claim on him?"

"There is something in that." But Mrs. Barrett seemed doubtful. "All the same, she must not be allowed—— Am I tidy, Edith?" Her fingers fluttered to her hat and her hair. "I think I had better go and see Miss Wolney."

"But, mother——"

"I can explain things"—Mrs. Barrett spoke with a certain dignity—"and, if the worst comes to the worst, clearly it is Rodney's place to yield to her wishes."

"And father?"

"'Papa' has managed by himself so far. If he needs help—I don't see that he does—but if he really must have it—you are clever, Edith, why should not you be the one to help him? In any case, Rodney must not be sacrificed."

Having cast her bomb at the feet of the family, frightened at her own audacity, yet not a little

elated, Mrs. Barett rose to her feet, ready for further action—action that, however well-intentioned, would probably prove so disastrous that at any cost it must be prevented.

Jeremiah half rose from his chair ; Edith instinctively blocked the way to the door, though neither thought for a moment of any physical compulsion. Meanwhile Mrs. Barett looked first at one and then at the other with the air of a defiant rabbit.

At this critical moment there came a decorous tap at the door and the voice of the 'Suffragan Bishop' announcing 'Miss Wolney.'

CHAPTER XXVI

THE HERO—IS HE A HERO?

"HERE she is." Mrs. Barrett was suddenly complacent. In her small, tenacious mind she welcomed the chance that had frustrated the evident intention of Jeremiah and Edith to prevent her speaking to Cecil. Jeremiah dropped back into his chair, assuming the look of humorous resignation that he reserved for his dealings with women. Brassyshine employed women packers.

Edith's first thought was for Cecil. She looked so youthful to be the centre of recent happenings; and, at the moment, so attractive that Edith's heart smote her as to how, after all, the blow would fall on Rodney.

Save for a slightly heightened colour, Cecil showed not the least embarrassment. After a perfunctorily formal greeting she broke out:

"You know, you have all been so good to me."

Her eyes were for Jeremiah, but her smile included Mrs. Barrett and Edith.

Everyone was seated by now. Mrs. Barrett bolt upright, with her hat subsiding unawares to its intended angle; it gave its wearer something of the oddly pathetic air of a dressed-up animal.

"You have all been so particularly kind in welcoming me and everything"—this time Cecil's

gaze, gay yet deprecatingly grateful, rested more especially on Edith—"that I feel I want to tell you all about it myself. Of course, people will talk."

"My dear"—Mrs. Barrett's prim air was unfriendly—"they are talking already."

"Let them. I'm sure *I* don't mind." But Cecil's nostrils were quivering. "It's no business of theirs, or anybody's. It's our own affair entirely. There's only one thing I want to say. It is all my fault. No one must blame Rodney."

At this Jeremiah met his daughter's eyes with understanding; but Mrs. Barrett drew up her spare figure even more stiffly as she answered:

"No one would think for a moment of blaming Rodney."

"That's all right," returned Cecil. "Anyway, it is better now than later, isn't it? It was my mistake, not Rodney's. So I am the one to right it. I felt certain we shouldn't suit. He's miles too good for me," she spoke jerkily; "it would be a strain to me to have to live up to him."

Mrs. Barrett shook her head.

"Believe me, Rodney's not at all hard to live with. I am sure, any nice young girl——"

"I'm not a nice young girl though by any means. Not half so nice or so good as I tried to make you think me. I should never do for a husband with high ideals."

"Or for one who wears dirty overalls?" Jeremiah slily suggested.

Cecil coloured hotly.

"You think that is it, but it isn't. I'd quite made up my mind before, really. I only said that about the business to test him. If he had given up his

wishes to mine I should have known that I meant something to him. And then—there is no knowing—I might have gone on with the thing.” She laughed. “And then, I suppose, there would have been one more unhappy marriage. But when I’d said ‘Don’t’ and he went straight and did it, it’s hardly likely I’d take a man like that for a husband.”

“For fear he’d not turn out obedient,” Jeremiah suggested.

“Whatever you may think, it’s hardly decent to jest about it.” Cecil spoke with sudden dignity.

“No, ‘Papa,’ please be serious.”

Mrs. Barrett reproved her ‘spouse’ much as she had done Rodney in his early boyhood.

Tears had risen to Cecil’s eyes unexpectedly.

“To me,” she said, “it is all very important. It means all my life to me.”

“And his to Rodney,” Edith said quietly.

“Of course it does. You need not think I am forgetting him. I am sorry, very sorry, that I have had to hurt him; but it wouldn’t have mended matters to have gone on hurting him.”

“I suppose you don’t think, even now, that you could——” Mrs. Barrett pleaded.

Cecil turned to her sunnily.

“I am afraid not, though I would have simply *loved* to have you for a mother.”

From that moment all Mrs. Barrett’s sympathies were for Cecil. Secretly she shook her head over Rodney. She did not exactly blame him, but again and again she told herself that young men were sadly headstrong and foolish.

Meanwhile, old Jeremiah, in his broadest of accents, was asking Cecil :

" You didn't hanker now, did ye, m' lass, for me as a father ? "

" I didn't." But her eyes coquetted. " How can I like you when you sacrifice poor Rodney to that horrid business ? "

" Supposing," he said, screwing up his eyes, " as how I was to release him again."

For a moment Edith, watching, saw a scared look pass quick as a camera shutter across Cecil's face. Then she said, almost carelessly :

" But you are not going to ? "

" Supposing I was to," he returned doggedly, " would that make any difference ? "

" Yes, dear," Mrs. Barrett thrust in, anxious and hurried ; " wouldn't that make a difference, if ' Papa ' decided—I mean if Rodney gave in—did as you asked him ? " For the moment this dainty, charmingly dressed ' Society ' girl seemed to the little Victorian lady eminently desirable, even as the wife of her adored son. " Wouldn't it make a difference ? "

" Yes, would it ? " The final question came from Edith, and Cecil did not like the flicker of a smile that accompanied it.

" No," she said firmly, " it would not make the slightest difference. Not now it wouldn't. I have written to Rodney, leaving him no room for doubt that my decision is final. I only just came—you have been so kind"—she included them all in her swift, effective glance—" so I just had to come and say good-bye."

" But "—Mrs. Barrett faltered—" if anyone asks——"

" You need only tell them the truth," said Cecil, adding with a laugh, " Won't that be refreshing ? "

"I am not sure," the small Victorian lady returned humbly, "that we know the truth." Vague hovering suggestions concerning the conduct of Rodney flitted like bats through her mind. But no, Rodney was *her* son, with true Victorian craft she assured herself.

Jeremiah rose to his feet, back to the hearth, his thumbs in his waistcoat arm-holes, he gave forth his dictum.

"The truth, as I take it, is that young madam would like us to know that our boy is not good enough—or else we, ourselves, are not good enough—for Miss Cecil Wolney."

"Or is it that I am not good enough for any of you?" Cecil said sweetly.

"Supposing," he said, with a smile—Rodney's smile that still had the power to make Cecil's heart throb uneasily—"supposing we leave it at that."

"You may say what you like," returned Cecil with a certain sweet gravity, "so long as no one blames Rodney. He comes out of it all with——"

"—out a stain on his character?" Jeremiah suggested.

"If that is how you like to put it."

"My poor boy"—his mother was winding her new gloves round and round her fingers—"my poor boy, he'll take all this hardly."

"I am sorry," said Cecil.

Edith had never liked her so well as at that moment.

"We are all sorry," she said quite truthfully.

"Are you?" Cecil looked up at her gratefully.

"I mean you, specially. I thought you disliked me,

that you would be so glad to know that I am not going to be forced upon you for a sister."

Edith smiled rather sadly.

"I never have had one. I think I should be very grateful for a sister."

"Not me though," said Cecil.

"It seems I am not to have the chance," returned Edith.

Taking all things into consideration the interview had not been so strained as might have been expected. When Jeremiah returned from showing Cecil out, an office of punctilious ceremony, he said, with an exaggeration of his usual assurance :

"Well, I'm not so cast down as I might be as that's over and done with. Edith, my dear, you shove up the window. I can't think why women want to make themselves into scent 'sacheys'; not, that is, so long as they're clean and wholesome. Now cheer up, 'Mamma,' it's no good counting the shells when you've made an omelet."

Mrs. Barrett replied with a sniff; then, quite disregarding the splash of two tears on the light-coloured gloves she was torturing, she broke out nervously :

"I wouldn't mind if I thought Rodney wouldn't mind, though it would have been in so many ways what one could have wished and—er—suitable and I would have liked to see *one* of my children married before——"

Jeremiah put a comfortable arm about her.

"Cheer up, old dear. Don't you be in a hurry. You're a bit over-young yet for a grandma. Now, Edith, what are you thinking of there, so solemn?"

"I was wondering," she answered abstractedly,

"Cecil coming like that—whether there is anything between her and Montague Craig."

"Hardly yet," Mrs. Barette said through her tears, indignantly. "You heard what she said about liking me for her mother. Besides, the engagement is only just broken. I am sure no *nice* girl——"

"Cecil would not like to be called a *nice* girl," said Edith.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE HERO FINDS A CHAMPION

THERE was no denying it. A solemn strain, marked by extraneous politeness, a deferential waiving of individual opinion, an almost eager desire to give way to one another in trifles had crept into the relations between Cecil and Linda. Their friendship was attenuated. The snapping point was imminent. Linda's mind turned with frank longing towards Aunt Emma and Cornwall; whilst, at the same time, she shrank from the thought of leaving London behind her. It is true Rodney was so deeply immersed in Brassyshine that there was little chance of her seeing him; she was not at all sure that she wanted to see him; but it was much to her that one place—even so mighty a place as London—held both of them.

Outwardly the two girls followed the lines of their old routine, talked and laughed, exchanged opinions, went in and out together—only—it was all so different. Their friendship was dead and was only galvanised to a jerky pretence of life between them.

The sun was shining cheerily, and the streets were full of the indescribable glow and colour of early summer when, one morning, Cecil came into Linda's room, fingering things, laughing, talking about

nothing in particular. Linda was putting away some clothes that had come from the laundry, opening and shutting drawers, placing things neatly.

Cecil came up behind her.

"You haven't forgotten, I expect, that letter I wrote to Rodney?"

"No." In a moment Linda's heart was thumping. "Why do you ask me?"

"Only I wondered. You might like to see the answer."

"No, no! It wasn't meant—for anybody."

"I got it a day or two ago. It made me feel sick, I can tell you."

"I thought you no longer cared for him."

"I don't, of course, in a way. But you can't love a man and—kiss him and so on—"

Linda stood still and staring.

"Need we"—she swallowed hard—"need we talk about it?"

"If you are still my friend, if you want to be of any use to me, we *must* talk about it. Isn't that the whole point and object of friendship—to be able to talk about things when you want to—to share, as they say, your joys and troubles?"

"It's always the troubles people want to share," Linda said dully.

"Of course it is. Anyone can be happy alone, so long as they *are* happy. But when you are wretched it's only natural to want other people to be wretched too. I know it sounds horrid, but most true things *are* horrid—like one's beautiful body being made up of slushy flesh and blood-vessels—or the moon being only dead ashes. I *hate* truth. And that brings me back. I don't love Rodney; I know

now I never did love him ; but I still like him, I want him still to like me. And see what he says in his letter ! ”

Linda's lips formed a mute protest.

Cecil took no notice. The letter she unfolded was worn-looking and crumpled.

“ Now listen. To begin with, he starts without any beginning. *I call that shirking.* He says, ‘ *I accept your decision and am willing to take all the blame in the matter.* ’ That's what I don't like. You see, by that he puts *me* in the wrong right away. It's just like a man—since the very first—with his ‘ The woman tempted me. ’ ”

Linda flamed.

“ You are wrong, quite wrong ; he wants, as a man does, to protect you, to take the blame so that you may go scatheless. Seeing it is you who are breaking the thing off, I think he is very generous. ”

“ Sorry, ” said Cecil, “ I can't see it quite in that light. But there's more, he goes on to say, ‘ *I hope you will be happy.* ’ Cheap, I call that. And he just signs himself ‘ *Rodney Barrett.* ’ ” She waited for comment that she might argue, destroy it ; and when none came, she burst out :

“ I call it insolent. At the very least, cold-blooded. He might have said he was broken-hearted. ”

“ Had he said it, it would have meant nothing. ”

“ You mean to say he is *not* broken-hearted ? ”

“ I mean, when anyone is broken-hearted they—could not talk about it. ”

“ I should. I should go rushing round to everyone, wanting them to know it and sympathise. ”

“ But a man would not, ” said Linda.

Cecil checked her excitement.

"When you come to think of it, perhaps he wouldn't." She waited a minute, then said, "When the creatures are so different in every way from us, why do we ever try to understand them?"

"But do we?" asked Linda.

"Of course we do. I suppose there's a certain excitement in it, or a faint far-away hope of a prize, like in guessing competitions. It's not a bit worth while, really."

She folded the letter.

"Linda, do you think he is broken-hearted, really?" Cecil's face looked cruel behind the bars of its youthfulness. "Do you think he is, Linda?"

The next moment she was smiling.

"They seem to get over it, all of them, very easily."

"Who? and what?"

"The men, you silly, and their little love troubles."

"They do not go deeply then."

Linda felt ashamed for humanity.

"They talk of dying for love," Cecil went on lightly. "All rot! They may believe in themselves, which I doubt. I, for one, don't believe in them."

"I think sometimes," so Linda flashed out, "that you do not believe in anyone or anything."

"You are wrong. I believe in myself, which is the only thing that really matters. And just now"—she laughed softly—"if you want to know, I believe also in—Monty."

If she had planned a surprise, it was successful. The colour ebbed from Linda's face, her voice sounded husky as she said:

"Montague Craig—what has he got to do with it?"

"You are dense!" To her own disgust Cecil blushed hotly. "Can't you see?"

Linda went whiter still before she said slowly:

"I don't think I see anything, clearly."

"Of course, we don't want it known by outsiders, not till people have done talking about—the other. I've wanted all along to tell you—but, you know, Linda dear, you *are* rather difficult."

Linda had averted her eyes, she did not turn them towards Cecil as she asked her:

"Tell me?"

"It was that day"—Cecil was annoyed to find her own tone conciliatory, almost apologetic—"that day when he and I went to the Coliseum together. There was a fool of a woman and an idiotic chorus. It was all your fault, really, because you wouldn't come; you were sulky, or something. If you had come it wouldn't have happened. Not so soon, anyway."

"Tell me?" Linda repeated with dry lips, automatically.

"Well—if you want it in black and white—a marriage has been arranged and—if they don't change their minds—will take place some day—between Montague Callam Craig, Esqre. of 42 Grosvenor Place, and Strathallow, Farnham, Hampshire, and Cecil, only daughter——"

"And you can jest about it?"

"You dear little prude—or Puritan, is it? Don't you know that life is a jest—that is—if you don't want to break your heart over it."

"Does Rodney know?" Linda whispered.

"How can I tell? It is not announced, but these things are like thistledown, every breath carries them."

"Do you think"—Linda's throat felt knotted—"that—he knew—when—he wrote that letter?"

"Of course not. That was written only the next day, and quite early."

"He hoped that you would be happy."

"Not meaning anything in particular."

"Mr. Craig is a friend of his."

"I know," Cecil said carelessly. "It was Rodney who introduced us."

"Did you—when you wrote to him——?"

"To which of them?"

"To *him*—Rodney—had you—did you care then for——"

"I had not thought of him in that way, if that is what you are trying to get at. Of course, I was feeling sore, and as though I didn't care a damn about what happened to any of us. And he was so nice and understanding. My dear—you can't think—the blessed relief and satisfaction of being just as silly and unideal as you like, and knowing all the while that he'll think none the worse of you. Dearest, whatever you do, don't marry a man better than yourself. In matters of goodness a man must look up to a woman. And if he's very much so himself, he sticks her up on a pedestal, and there she stands, poor dear, open-eyed, sleepless, on the verge always of coming down with a crash. For my part, I was getting so nervy I took a header off the pedestal, just to put an end to the suspense. I don't have to climb or pose for Monty. And you can't think how grateful I am to him for the com-

fort of it. The only thing now is"—she put an arm round Linda—"that you must be sweet and congratulate me."

For the first time in the course of their friendship Linda made no response to Cecil's caresses.

"Of course, if you are huffy——" Cecil drew back, justified as she supposed in her anger, imagining that at least she had done Linda no wrong, unconscious that she had broken down for her youth's supreme illusion that other people are as we see them. Linda had owned to herself that Cecil was thoughtless, flighty, even on occasions malicious—but—there had always been a 'but' until all that it had implied had been swept ruthlessly away by Cecil herself. In the dishonour of her friend, Linda felt herself dishonoured. And behind and above all was the pitiful thought that it was Rodney who must suffer. With an oft-repeated pang she recalled him as he had been in the blue air of Cornwall, sunny and youthful, with untroubled eyes. Now, she pictured him altered—quiet, grave, and disillusioned. Never again would he be the same Rodney. In all probability she would never even see him again, never have the sad opportunity of noting the difference. Naturally he would shun all those connected with Cecil. At the thought, Linda felt her heart was breaking.

Meanwhile, Cecil was talking rapidly, trying to justify her conduct, accusing herself by excusing.

"Don't, don't," Linda cried out at last. "Let us leave it. There it is. It has happened. All the talking in the world cannot explain it away. Don't let us pretend it is anything but—what it is."

"You are cruel"—there was a whimper in Cecil's voice—"it is not like you to be so hard."

"Am I hard? Perhaps I am. I am sorry, of course. But you see—I thought so much of you, Cecil."

"Rub it in." She shrugged her shoulders.

"I did not mean it like that." The tone of the other was humble. "And I am sure I hope—I do really hope—you will be happy."

"You hope—without faith, or any charity."

"Just now I feel as though I have no faith in anything."

"And you were always a bit lacking in charity."

"Cecil!"

"It is true. Good people are hard, always. You can't understand that what for you is plain and easy, for less virtuous people is ever so difficult. You walk straight on, with your head in the air, whilst we unfortunates flounder and stumble. I know I have made a mess of things; but it was 'no earthly' for me to plunge deeper. Monty's a contented sort, he's jolly glad to have got me, and not at all likely to repent his bargain."

"Nor did—Rodney."

"I'm not so sure about that. Perhaps he did, and the business bogy was a bit of a plot to test me." She had not an idea of the half-truth in her words as she said them lightly, laughed, and went on: "If it was, it seems to me *I* am the one who has come up smiling."

"And does that make you feel happy?"

"Naturally."

"Do you like"—Linda's voice rose in a crescendo of indignation—"do you like to think of him being miserable?"

"My dear child, *he* won't be long miserable. You may be pretty sure he'll soon console himself."

"There you do him a wrong," Linda said staunchly.

"I don't. He'd be a fool to let me spoil his life for him. He's sense enough to know I am not worth it. Hearts are caught in the rebound—don't you forget it." Her face took on a malicious likeness to le Saxe's marble. "Who knows?" she added. "Perhaps I may dance at *your* wedding."

Linda flamed, flared.

"Cecil, you are vulgar, you are horrid, I hate you!"

"You don't really," Cecil assured her quietly, "only you consider it the thing to say so. After all, I have suggested nothing reprehensible, nor even improbable."

"You have!" fiercely.

Cecil laughed.

"I know—you yourself know—that down in Cornwall you had your little hopes, fears, and heart-flutterings."

"You are a fiend, Cecil!"

"I'd rather be that, any day, than an angel. Angels are horribly self-controlled and long-suffering."

"They speak the truth, at all events."

"So far, then, I am akin to the angels. It is true that you took a fancy to Rodney, and you can't deny it."

"How dare you suggest——"

"Things that are undeniable?" Cecil was flitting about the room; she always suggested a malevolent moth when the teasing mood seized her. "I'll tell you what," she went on maliciously, "I

shan't want now to keep Rodney's portrait. I'll give it to you as it's not worth returning. It would look quite in place on your neat little dressing-table."

Linda felt perfectly stiff with passion.

"Will you go—or shall I?" She brought out her words with difficulty.

"Of course I'll go, if you feel like that," said Cecil; "all the same, you ought to be grateful to me that I bear you no ill-will—am not even jealous"—she was edging away towards the door. "As a matter of fact, you are so transparent that I am quite sure, down in Cornwall, Rodney must have seen quite plainly——"

She escaped, leaving her sentence unfinished. On the other side of the door her heart smote her. She had been a brute to Linda. Linda had been loyal to her, always. A brute—that was what she had been; worse still, she could not quite rid herself of the suspicion that she had been vulgar. She was warm-hearted enough to think of owning her fault. She laid a hand on the knob of the door and listened. Was Linda crying?

Had she been, Cecil would have rushed in; mutual sobs would have re-cemented their friendship.

Linda was not sobbing. She was moving about the room quietly as usual.

"Tidying!" Cecil exclaimed with disgust. "The woman who can 'tidy' never yet broke her heart over anything."

CHAPTER XXVIII

ALMOST IGNORES THE HERO

CECIL went about with the air of a chastened kitten—a kitten that has been whipped for breaking the china; not ashamed, for no kitten possesses a conscience, but uncomfortable, playing graceful tricks to attract attention, annoyed to find itself out of favour. To her parents Cecil showed herself charmingly affectionate.

She was pretty sure of her mother. The first shock over, she would say, 'The child is quite right. It is better to find such things out soon than too late; and after all, there was the family!'

Which was exactly what Mrs. Wolney did say more than once to intimate friends who came to condole with her.

Cecil's father was not quite so easy. For a day or two he treated her coldly. She had touched the raw nerve of his probity. But after a little delicately administered coaxing he began to realise that what he mostly desired was his daughter's happiness. There was absolutely nothing against Montague Craig. He was rich and well connected. And if it suited Cecil to mate herself to a cipher——! Mr. Wolney expressively raised his dark eyebrows. Finally received back into favour, Cecil had not the least idea that her father still had a sore spot in his

heart for Rodney ; she was all herself again—laughing, teasing and lovable ; none the less happy because her secret engagement of necessity assumed an officially clandestine character. This added a *sauce piquante* to all discreet condolences over her broken engagement. She would repeat such little scenes for Montague's benefit, drawing a grave, sweet face and saying, ' We found out in time that we were unsuited.'

For his part, Montague Craig liked kittens, and never could see why people made such a fuss over the breaking of china.

On the surface, Linda and Cecil were friendly. Sometimes Linda, reproaching herself for fickleness, managed, by dint of exhausting exertion, to coax into flickering flame the old fire of friendship. It wavered and died when the chill breath of remembrance blew on it. Not only had Cecil trampled on Linda's affection—she had poisoned the soil where it grew by her evil suggestions. No longer could she let her thoughts hover, bird-like, over the recollection of those few weeks in Cornwall ; Cecil had smirched all the blue and gold for her. To think that Rodney had guessed ! Linda's cheeks grew wan and transparent ; her eyes, with violet stains under them, had darkened.

One day Mr. Wolney caught her by the elbows.

" London does not suit our Cornish Fair Maid." He spoke as a jest, but his kind eyes were questioning.

Feeling she would die if a soul guessed her secret, Linda answered him gaily, set herself to appear at her liveliest. After a while it became almost easy to live like a gnat on the surface, ignoring the dark-

ness beneath her. Sometimes, it is true, in a room full of people she would glance round her furtively, questioning.

All this jest and animation, was it real or forced for each one of them? At others, she wondered why writers waxed sentimental about suffering, when it was so easy to suffer. The place scarred over so quickly. She fancied herself grown hard and callous.

But she had not as yet come face to face with Rodney!

One day Edith Barrett asked Linda to tea. Linda welcomed the invitation. She did not feel sure, but thought it might be possible to speak out to Edith. As one who aches to set down, if but for a moment, the weight of a burden, she longed to talk of her trouble. She was not so hard, then, as she had supposed, if she let herself think of an outlet.

It was a still summer day, and, after the dust and glare of the streets, Edith's room was doubly cool and refreshing. It looked faintly grey after the brilliant sunshine. Outside the window the roses were crisped and withered, but a few summer shoots of foliage thrust up to the sky with a ruddy vigour. It encouraged Linda to see them.

Edith was in white, with a touch of red that accentuated the shadowy coolness of her surroundings. Linda herself was wearing the greyish blue that was 'her colour.' Edith thought her looking quite lovely. This mutual admiration made things smooth between them as they sipped China tea, talked or were silent.

Once Edith asked thoughtfully :

"Do you think a woman is happier with or without marriage?"

Linda started. Unconsciously her thoughts had strayed down to Cornwall. In this grey, still room, her ears had been open to the far-off siren song of the ocean. Recalled from forbidden ways, she flushed and started.

"I—how can I tell? It seems to me—you would have to try—and then—it would be too late."

"There is something in that," Edith said meditatively. "It is certainly a far-reaching experiment. Yet only a coward would fear to face it."

Linda put her cup and saucer down on the table.

"I seem to know so little—so little about anything."

Edith smiled at her.

"That shows how fast you are learning. I have no doubt that a few months ago you thought you knew a great deal about everything."

"Perhaps I did—except, of course, the things that one does not—that you ought not to know about."

"According to Aunt Emma?"

Linda looked down.

"Do you know, I'm not sure that Aunt Emma is not right. What is the use of knowing such things?"

"Would you like to live in a sort of black box of ignorance?"

"I suppose not, though some people could be quite happy."

"People, not individuals."

"There is a difference?"

"You and I are individuals, the rest are people."

"You and I in a wide sense."

"Certainly."

"I think I begin to see what you mean. It is all rather wonderful and tremendously interesting." The look of weariness had gone from Linda's face as though, like a veil, she had removed it.

"I suppose," she went on, "whatever happens, so long as you go on learning and knowing, life cannot be utterly empty. Yet isn't there a danger of making a hobby of knowledge, like the useless lumber of insects, dried flowers, and fossils some people spend all their time in collecting?"

"There is no fear," Edith assured her, "so long as you live for the collecting and not for the collection."

"There is life in the one, you mean, and death in the other."

Edith leant forward in her chair; her flame-like colour had heightened; she looked beautiful, Linda thought, as, faltering a little from her usual clear, careful utterance, she said:

"You have not yet answered my question."

"How can I?" replied Linda. "I should have to be terribly wise to answer it."

"Child, I want you, yourself, no cold abstract wisdom. What do you *think*? You must have thoughts about a thing so vital."

Linda looked out of the window. The young green and rich madder of the upspringing rose-shoots invigorated her, and she felt able to answer.

"If you put it so, there seems no question about it. No woman is complete till she has fulfilled her destiny, just as no plant is complete till it has blossomed."

"And fruited," said Edith.

Their eyes met, solemn, sweet, understanding.

Edith went on :

"I did not think so, always. There was something attractive to me in standing alone, tied to no one—the mother of great deeds instead of small babies."

"And now ? "

"Is it weakness, I wonder, that makes me dream of the babies ? "

"Edith"—Linda's voice sank as it would do in some prayer-filled cathedral—"have you—are you—going to be very happy ? "

Edith covered her face, but uncovered it quickly.

"Silly, false shame," she said hurriedly, bright-eyed and smiling, "when I am really so glad, and as triumphant as the most unintelligent woman who has found her man and the meaning of things in a moment."

"Who is it ? " Linda's eyes sparkled.

"You have met him, I think—Bob Hendrey."

For a cold half-second Linda felt shivering in on herself. The little guinea-pig man and this splendid woman ! Then she thrust the thought aside as unworthy. Edith Barrett was too great-hearted to care about outward seeming. In spite of his snippety talk and white eyelashes, if Edith cared—Bob Hendrey must have a soul worth loving.

"I hope," she said, breathing quickly, "I do hope you will be very happy."

"I don't care," Edith said earnestly, "so long as he is."

Linda smiled lovingly.

"I thought you disapproved of individual happiness."

"Not the thing itself, only the desire for it. The desire hinders, happiness helps us."

She smiled at a thought of her own, tenderly yet not without triumph, then she said :

"Yes. I hope to make Bob very happy. His is one of those blithe souls that is meant to absorb and spread happiness."

Sympathetically, Linda tried to forget the white eyelashes.

Edith was playing with her teaspoon. It was unusual for her to be restless ; besides, as a rule, she did not bring her hands, which were coarse like her father's, into undue prominence.

"Oddly enough," she broke out, "in a way, Bob and I owe our happiness to Cecil Wolney. He had heard about the broken engagement, and came to find Rodney. He thinks all the world of Rodney. He overflowed with indignation—and that's how it all happened. Of course, he *says* his was love at first sight. I told him not to stoop to conventional platitudes. No one ought to know when love is born in them. *Falling* in love is so incompetent and helpless. I like to think Bob and I have loved one another always, perhaps—who knows?—in some bygone existence. The only thing I can't understand is why I took so long before I knew that I cared for him. Perhaps I was so small and blind I could not see beyond his physical insignificance."

Linda felt ashamed of her own standpoint.

"Aren't we like children," she said hastily, "judging by outward appearances ? "

"Children are wiser than we. They have not lost the soul instinct."

"What is that?"

"The delicate spiritual antennæ, able to feel things our other senses are too coarse to be aware of."

"Do we lose it when we are no longer children?"

"Perhaps we regain it when love opens our eyes for us."

They were silent till Linda said :

"You know, I suppose, about Cecil and——"

Edith nodded.

"Bob told me. They are well-suited. Both live on the surface. Montague by nature and Cecil by inclination. I was pleased to hear it."

"You don't think it will make it harder for—for *him*?"

"I don't. The thing that I feared was that she would play fast and loose with Rodney. As it is, he will be no worse for a good knock-down blow. His life, so far, has been too easy."

"I don't see how it can be. All the nicest people have easy lives. It is when they begin to be worried and troubled that they get disagreeable and hard to deal with. I know by myself. Down in Cornwall it was all so easy. Little things did not matter. I felt a sort of sunshine towards everybody. Everyone seemed delightful and *so* interesting——" She stopped with a sudden qualm.

What would Edith think of her?

"I think I know what you mean," said Edith; "people who have had nothing to trouble them are more pleasant. The question is, are they worthier?"

"Wouldn't you rather be pleasant than worthy? I would."

"It is not a question, as I take it, of what you would rather. It is, which is most valuable—the pleasant or the worthy? Besides, there is really no reason why you should not be both."

"Except that no one ever is. Worthy people are usually bores; in some subtle way they make you uncomfortable, you are always glad to be rid of them."

"Are you not confusing the *really* worthy with those that are *called* worthy?"

"Perhaps I am," Linda acknowledged.

"It makes all the difference. The people *called* pleasant are not usually pleasing."

To this Linda agreed with unfeigned heartiness, recalling Aunt Emma's not infrequent, 'My dear, I wonder you do not like Mrs. So-and-so, she is such a *pleasant* person.'

Then she glanced at her wrist-watch.

"I have stayed a fearful time, and I know you are always busy."

"Don't go yet though," said Edith. "I want you to stay a bit longer. To tell you the truth I am expecting Rodney, and I know he would like to see you."

Linda sprang up hastily. Her eyes were those of a startled animal.

"I'm so sorry—another time—I must get back—I didn't know it was so late."

"I thought," Edith said gravely, "we had agreed there need be no conventional untruths between you and me, Linda."

Linda sat down limply.

"If you must have the truth"—her breath came in short pants—"I am quite sure he—your brother—would *not* care to see me."

Edith raised her brows.

"Why not? *You* have not treated him badly."

"Of course not. But, you see—won't he connect me in his mind with Cecil? I am quite sure it would be better——"

She got up again, hurriedly.

"All that," Edith told her, "is not one little bit like Rodney. He takes people and things for their own worth very simply. I happen to know that he values your friendship."

"*How* do you know it?"

"Because he himself told me."

"When did he tell you?"

"When he came back from Cornwall."

"I see—then——" Linda said dully.

"He was very keen at the time that I should meet you. Of course, he did not know then you were coming to Town, nor just how, in the event, we should be brought together."

"Through Cecil. But that does not alter the fact that, since then, things are different. It is only natural that he should want to forget everything."

"I should say Rodney takes life too naturally to want to forget. As it happens, I know he wants to see you."

"It does not seem likely."

"He thinks very highly of your judgment."

Her judgment? It seemed rather a pitiful thing to Linda. Eyes, a voice, a dimple, a smile—these are the things that draw men to a woman. But,

judgment! It seemed to thrust her harshly still farther away from Rodney.

"Listen," said Edith, as steps sounded along the stone passage. "Rodney is coming."

Rodney coming! The white-walled room was whirling round Linda, whilst in her ears echoed the mocking voice of Cecil, 'Of course, he saw through you in Cornwall.'

CHAPTER XXIX

A HEART ACHES FOR THE HERO

LINDA had longed for the night. And now the night had come she knew not how to live through it. It had all been dreadful.

Laughing, talking, pretending to people. The Wolneys had had a dinner party. Montague Craig had been there. The engagement was still unannounced. To Linda's mind, Cecil was reckless. It could not be long before everyone knew of it. Cecil had been radiantly happy and had looked quite beautiful when Linda did not compare her with the picture she had brought from the little white room of Edith. But that would not bear thinking of—not till she was alone—and the evening seemed endless. It must end at last, and she be alone.

Would she cry? she wondered. It is said to relieve you. It might, perhaps, stop the feeling of two cold hands that were pressing the bones of her skull together continually.

There were moments when she had a sick fear that people must see what she suffered—must ask her what was the matter. Instead, oddly enough, in the bustle of parting she heard someone say to Cecil:

"I did not know your little friend was so pretty. Her eyes are like sapphires."

Eyes like sapphires ! What did it matter ?

The time passed. It does, though God alone knows how slowly. At last she was alone.

It was late, and the house seemed quietly breathing. Now and again a little lost wind moaned through the key-hole or pulled with fretful hands at the window-curtains. Linda had not undressed. Her frock—it was the grey one with the roses on it—showed her white curving neck and her arms : even Linda, who steadfastly undervalued herself, allowed that her arms and neck were ‘quite pretty.’ She looked at them now, in the glass. Eyes like sapphires ! creamy neck ! rounded, tapering arms ! She would have admired them in another. But for herself !—did it matter ?

She had not cried. She felt not the slightest inclination. She tried to pace up and down, but her legs shook, she felt sickly and dull. She sat down slowly and very quietly. She had a feeling that she ought to be noiseless. The cold hands pressed her skull harder and harder. She felt something would break in her brain or burst on her chest where there was a feeling of oppression and tightness. And all the while, though her thoughts shied away from Edith Barrett’s white room continually, yet continually something drew them back to the scene of her humiliation.

“Why did Edith do it ? ” she asked aloud moaningly. “It was cruel, so cruel to trap me.”

She rocked her head in her hands. There were pains in it now, sharp, stabbing pains. She almost welcomed them. Anything was better than the cold, relentless compression.

“If only,” she moaned, “there was someone I

could tell it to, someone who would just listen and say nothing. I could not bear them to say anything."

A clock struck one melodiously. Like an electric spark the sound set a train of memory in motion.

"Mother! mother!" sobbed Linda.

As once before, she had found an outlet. Still in her evening frock with its careless rosebuds, she sat down at the writing-table. At first her hand shook so that the pen fell out of her fingers. In an aloof sort of way she was impressed by this sign of her suffering. She felt a little stronger because of it, able to grasp the pen more firmly, to drive it quickly over the paper.

It was a cruel thing to do, and I am sure she did not mean it. He was as abashed as I was. When he came to the door he stood, white and troubled. When he spoke conventional words of greeting he did not look at me. Mother! what have I done that he should not look at me? I loved his eyes so grey and honest, strong and grey like the rocks of Cornwall.

Mother, I know really—I knew then why he would not look at me—Cecil was right. Down in Cornwall I did not know—but he knew it. Most men would have despised me—he only pities me——

But to be pitied!

I thought I had reached the bottom-most depths when I knew he had given his love to Cecil.

That was nothing to this. At least, my self-respect was left to me. It sounds a poor thing;

it was at least a straw to cling to. Now, I have nothing.

Mother, how do we live through things like this? Did you, I wonder? Or did you meet suffering with a meek, white face and sink under it? Is it hard to die, Mother, when you are still young and your body full of warm life? Is it hard to die?

Not so hard, it cannot be, as to go on living. Mother, I wish I were weaker—weaker in body, weaker in spirit—so that I could go under. I am horribly strong. Unless something breaks in my head, I am afraid I shall still go on living. It would not all be so dreadful if we did not have to pretend. What cruel power is this that has settled that, whatever happens, we must still go on pretending to be well and happy? Did you pretend, too, Mother? Or did you give up and go under? Mother, I want to try and tell you. He looked white and cold then. I did not actually see him, for a mist had filled the little white room when he entered, only I knew just how he was looking.

But we had to pretend.

There was Edith. She made a pretence of unconcerned cheerfulness. Perhaps it was not pretence with her though. She is happy. I am so glad that in all this confusion of suffering someone is happy. And Edith deserves to be happy. She is the best of all of us—all but Rodney. He is the finest because the simplest of all of us. Edith has thought for herself, striven for herself. For others, too, but for herself foremost. Rodney is to himself a blithe, easy companion.

Self goes with him, as with all of us ; but he is no more conscious of himself than of his shadow.

It is so hard Rodney should be the one to be so unhappy. And he is !

When the mist had cleared and I dared to glance at him, I could see the difference in him. He looks years older than when we were in Cornwall. It hurt me, because he was a boy then. His voice has altered, it has lost its clear ring that I loved to listen for. It is softer now and patient. A voice, a young voice especially, can break your heart with its patience.

We talked about many things. Edith managed all that for us. Besides pitying me, Rodney was sore about Cecil. It must have made it worse, seeing me without her.

Something was said about Bob Hendrey.

" Bob is one of the best," he said.

And Edith—" How about Montague Craig ? "

I wondered that she should speak of him.

But he laughed.

" Monty chose me and I chose Bob Hendrey. That's how friendships are made," he told her.

" And you are not jealous of Monty ? " Edith asked.

How could she ?

He looked at her.

It was something that I could see him look so, though at another.

And he answered :

" Honestly I hope he will be happy. He ought to."

That stabbed. Through and through me I felt what *he* must be suffering. How could Cecil ?

Are there many women so cruel, I wonder? You see, Cecil made him ask her that second time, she told me so herself, and she was playing with him! At the time, I loved her and thought her motives must be good—but now! It is still hard to doubt, to condemn Cecil. She has been so much to me, and just now I seem to have lost everything.

Really, of course, you cannot lose what you have never had, and I see what a little fool I was ever to dream that Rodney——

Even Cecil wasn't half good enough. All his life he has been used to Edith.

At first it seemed almost tactless to me when she mentioned Montague and Cecil; it showed, really, how much better she knows her brother than I do; for he talked quite easily, it seemed, on the subject.

All the while I cowered and shivered. For still, he never looked at me, he lowered his eyes when he spoke to me, his voice sounded harsh and constrained. I could be almost glad now of his pity, for I believe he dislikes me. If you pity a thing you do get to dislike it in time, when pity has become irksome.

Well, he and I are not likely to meet again.

Mother! mother! Can I bear it?

He spoke so to me that my courage oozed away, I could hardly control my voice to answer him with a word or two. When I could, I answered him through Edith, and he did the same, till it came about we were both talking to Edith and not to each other; there is a bitter sort of humour to me in the recollection, or there would be had

there not been a ghastly suggestion that he and I had lost our warm human personality—that we were disembodied.

I longed to get away, but did not know how to; I suppose he did not either. So we went on talking through Edith, he looking sore and aloof and I with lumps in my throat and my voice getting colder and harder, till it frightened me to hear it.

Presently he was saying that he had heard through someone on the Committee that his Town Hall plans had a very good chance of being the ones chosen. Edith's eyes sparkled, and she looked so glad and triumphant as she said, "Splendid! Roddy-boy, how splendid!"

But I could have burst out crying to think how much it might have meant, and that now it would only make things harder for him. And in a strangled sort of a way I blurted out:

"What a pity!"

At that Edith seemed to remember—I suppose she must have forgotten—the light died out of her face and she said:

"Rodney, what will you do about it?"

And he put his hands in his pockets and turned away to the window and said:

"What ought I to do about it?"

And then there was a dreadful silence. And after a bit, still without looking at anyone, he said again:

"What ought I to do about it?"

Rather dreadfully at that moment I remembered what Edith had said about—him—and my judgment, and I wanted so much to say, 'Of

course, you must stand by your father.' In the old days I should have said it easily ; but I could not get the words out somehow. And every second the silence grew more terrible. I was longing, praying, that Edith would say something—but she did not. She was tracing a pattern on the table before her, and waiting and listening.

I think, somehow, even then, had he and I been alone together I could have broken down that dreadful barrier and spoken. But Edith was there. Not that I was afraid of Edith. I love her. Only, before her I could not.

Rodney turned his face towards us slowly, his eyes were lowered.

"I suppose," he said, "there are other things besides Death that have to be faced in loneliness."

For one brief moment he glanced at me. And I knew that he had looked for something from me. And I had failed him.

I love him. And I had failed him.

Mother! why is it hard to die when to live is so dreadful?

He went away. I don't suppose I shall ever see him again. It is better, no doubt. But—Mother—I don't really think I can live very long. The pain in my head—at my heart—is so dreadful.

She finished, turned a yawn into a sigh. It re-appeared, a yawn unmistakably. The squares of the window had paled. The summer dawn was just breaking.

"I believe," said Linda aloud, facing a fact that seemed to her almost despicable, "I believe I really am sleepy."

She folded her paper.

"To-morrow," she went on—"no, it is already to-day—will it be cowardly, I wonder?—I will say Good-bye to all of it, and go back to Aunt Emma."

CHAPTER XXX

CANNOT QUITE LEAVE OUT THE HERO

As the 'Suffragan Bishop,' with due solemnity, delivered him into Jeremiah Barett's study, Bob Hendrey was unpleasantly aware that his hands were perspiring and that there was a salty taste in his mouth such as he had known when he sat for his 'General.' He swallowed hard. He wasn't going to be turned down this time. He was in for something too well worth having. At the same time he was fully aware of his own presumption. That he should dare face Edith's father seemed to him a thing quite stupendous.

Old Barett had a book in his hand. He did not trouble to rise, but faced the young man over his spectacles.

"Very warm—what?" Bob remarked jerkily.

"It has a way of being warm about this time of year." Jeremiah's smile robbed the words of any irony.

"I've come——"

Jeremiah smiled more broadly.

"I've come——" Bob played with his hat.

"S'pose you know—what—come for."

Jeremiah grunted, then, turning to replace his book on the shelf, he stopped to run his stubbed finger along the titles.

"If it's Edith," he said rather shortly, "you may as well know I have no authority over her."

Bob wriggled. He had not been prepared for this nonchalant attitude. It seemed, in some obtuse way, to cast a slur on Edith. Surely the man was interested in his own daughter! Bob's face reddened. His brows, lashes, and close-cropped hair stood out whiter than usual.

"You can't mean—hang it—I mean—it's this way——" He wriggled and boggled, overwhelmed by a sense of his own exceeding insignificance.

Jeremiah, lolling back in his chair, his thumbs in his waistcoat arm-holes, regarded the young man with his bright little eyes under their bushy grey brows steadily.

Like a small hypnotised animal, Bob Hendrey stared back at him.

"As I say, I've no authority," Jeremiah said slowly. "Edith's the independent sort. What's more, if she says she'll do a thing, she'll do it. If, as I suppose, she's promised to marry you, she will marry you. I can't prevent it."

"But—do you—er—don't you—want—er—to prevent——" The small animal was lapsing into insensibility.

Jeremiah lowered his big broad face nearer.

"Have you one plausible reason, a single good reason, why I should want you for my son-in-law?"

"No—sir—I—haven't."

"Come now, that's better. I'm beginning to like you." Jeremiah's tone was genial.

Bob, suffering mentally from pins and needles

of reviving animation, did not flinch as the old man laid a heavy hot hand on his knee.

"You're honest, young man, and that's one good reason for you."

"As to that," Bob spluttered, "it isn't likely—you wouldn't expect—Edith's not the sort—to look twice at—at an outsider."

"There you have me straight. Edith's as good a judge of character as anyone going." He laughed genially. "We may as well get on and get the thing over. What are the questions—I've never studied the subject—you don't happen to know, do you?—the sort of questions a man asks of his prospective—is that the right word?—sounds more like a mining claim—a man asks, I mean, of the man who wants to be his—I mean the other chap's son-in-law?"

Bob shook his little fair head.

"Can't say—have had no experience."

"Nor I neither. I've nobbut Edith, and so far as we've gone you're the only one she's picked on."

At which Bob's colour deepened.

"Family now?" Jeremiah continued. "For my part I'm starting a family."

"Hendreys," Bob returned humbly, "Hendreys—been going on, awful time, really."

"So long that they're getting played out a bit, eh?"

Bob looked into his hat, it always annoyed him that he took so small a size.

"'Fraid we are—I'm—er—the last, anyway."

"There's a lot in fresh blood though." Jeremiah threw himself back in his chair and grinned like an

amiable ogre. "Then there's position and so on. I don't want my girl to go short of anything. I've always talked of ten thousand"—he smoothed one of his wet locks—"and I don't suppose it would break me, not if I doubled it."

"Please don't—er—a man 'ud rather work—don'tcher know—to keep his—er—what d'you call 'em?"

Jeremiah chuckled.

"And how do you propose to set about keeping your—er—what d'you call 'em?"

"I've got—secretary at present."

"Your screw now?"

"A hundred."

"And you propose to keep my girl on the inside of a hundred?"

"The gov'ner—he—one-fifty."

"Um—and you call that money earned by working?"

"Come to think of it—it isn't. Is it? I can work though." He looked round him, clear-eyed, appealingly child-like.

Jeremiah felt his heart grow soft towards him.

"Well. As I take it Edith means to have you, where's the good of us talking?"

Bob glowed.

"I'll—I'll—tell you—life won't be long enough—all I'll want to do for her."

Jeremiah got up and laid his big hand on the little man's shoulder.

"Tell you what," he said, "you've got the right stuff in you."

"No you don't—not really—do you?"

"Hullo!" Jeremiah shouted, as a light touch came on the door-handle. "That you, 'Mamma'? Come in. You're wanted. Allow me to present—our future son-in-law."

Mrs. Barrett pausing, scared, on the threshold—missed her cue, murmured something about 'so sudden.'

"We've got past that." Jeremiah's fat form was shaking with laughter. "He's asked 'Papa' by this time."

"And what has 'Papa' answered?" Though obviously flustered, Mrs. Barrett managed it archly.

"Why, of course, 'Bless you my children!'"

He cast aside his jocular manner and with a fatherly light softening his eyes he said:

"And now, my boy, we won't keep you. Likely you'll want to find Edith and tell her she may have you; but," with a smile, "I won't take any responsibility. Stop, though"—as Bob, perspiring gratitude, made his way to the door—"you won't know how to find Edith's snugery."

"Yes—I do—quite well I know it," Bob answered naively.

"Well, Mamma," Jeremiah said, as soon as they were alone, placing his hands gently on her fragile shoulders. "And what have you to say to your son-in-law?"

"I—I think I am glad he's so small." She spoke emphatically. "Always, I've a little bit dreaded—Edith's husband. I pictured him big—with a moustache, perhaps—and I've worried myself with the thought of kissing him." She spoke with an air of confession.

"Kiss me instead, old dear, and don't scare that little chap, not at present. As a matter of fact"—he moved towards her with a puppy-like gambol—"you're a bit too young and too good-looking for promiscuous kissing—not with my consent, anyhow. And because I've never been jealous yet, it doesn't say that I couldn't be. And so you approve of the boy, do you?"

"I do, I think; and yet—I wonder what Edith sees in him?"

Jeremiah grew grave.

"Don't you know, Edith is one of those women who are born mothers?"

"No, really, do you think so? I was always afraid—she's so clever. When she was tiny, Ann said often—perhaps I let her be rather familiar, but bathing the children together and so on—Ann used to say, 'There's Miss Edith'll be an old maid. You mark my words, ma'am.'—No, even married—I'm rather afraid—those women with brains—I don't know how it is—but so often—they have no children."

"How about my wife, then? Didn't I marry a clever young lady?"

She beamed.

"But only moderately clever. And we had but two children."

"Rattling good ones, both of them. Awful it must be s'pose they turn out badly."

"But why"—Mrs. Baret's neat little mind always returned to an unfinished subject—"why did you call Edith, of all people, a born mother?"

"Because she's never suited 'less she has some-

thing to mother. Rodney came first, then this, that, and the other scheme or undertaking. And now—and this'll last her, I'm thinking—there comes along this little man, with the soul of a child, or I don't know anything."

Mrs. Barrett looked perplexed, almost annoyed.

"I don't think," she said slowly, "a child-like man would have appealed to me. It is only natural and right that a woman should look up to her husband."

"And should she look down on a child? Lord bless you! Who was it said 'of such is the Kingdom of Heaven'?"

Mrs. Barrett coloured. To her mind it was not quite—say nice—to quote Scripture in ordinary conversation. But Jeremiah would do it. Discreetly she changed the subject.

"The main thing is for dear Edith to be happy. She is a good girl, and she ought to be." As with many mothers, the fact of her daughter's engagement had greatly increased that daughter's worth and accentuated her own affection for Edith. Suddenly her kind little face clouded over.

"Dear, dear," she exclaimed, "but all this will make it harder for Rodney. He doesn't say much, but I'm certain the poor boy is pining."

"Pining—not he!" Jeremiah repudiated the pining idea for his offspring. "A bit off colour, he may be, with the worry of it. But he's not had a knock-out blow, not by any means. It stands like this, as I see it—the boy made a big mistake."

"You don't mean as regards his own feelings for that girl Cecil."

“Not quite that—yet that in a way.” Jeremiah drew out a pipe and set himself by violent blowing to clear the stem. It seemed a refractory pipe, and occupied all his attention. At all events, Mrs. Baret could get nothing more out of him.

CHAPTER XXXI

A GLIMPSE INTO THE SHRINE OF THE HERO

ANN's arms were akimbo, her little puckered red face was as acid as an unripe plum.

"What's Miss Edith mean by it, anyway?" she snapped out aggressively.

Mrs. Barett looked uncomfortable. Though not even to herself would she have acknowledged it, she was secretly frightened of Ann. 'What would Ann say?' Though, probably, far from aware of it, that question made up at all times a large percentage of the good lady's thoughts, more especially when family events of importance were impending. So, having some measure of gentle diplomacy, she had approached the subject of Edith's engagement in a roundabout way, thrusting out sensitive feelers for the honey of Ann's approval.

As that worthy would have expressed it, Ann wasn't having any.

"What, anyhow, does Miss Edith mean by it?" she asked again doggedly.

"She means," her mistress answered, with some show of spirit, "to be very happy—and—no doubt—they will help one another."

Ann grunted.

"That's it, is it?" She was clearly unmollified.

"They are going to help one another, are they. Then all I can say is God help the pair of them."

"No doubt He will." So Mrs. Barrett admonished her.

Ann sniffed.

"I can't say, and you know it, m'am, as I ever did hold Miss Edith a beauty. That black hair's not to my taste, and her colour a bit high for a lady."

"Really, Ann!" Mrs. Barrett—as often—feebly protested.

Ann folded her arms.

"If so be as you didn't wish me to say anything, m'am"—Ann's way of saying ma'am had a subduing effect always on Mrs. Barrett—"if you didn't *wish* of me to say anything, then why did you tell it me?"

"I told you"—the more Mrs. Barrett was subdued the more she stood out for her dignity—"of course, I told you of Miss Edith's engagement because, during long years of service, I have come to look on you"—she was icily condescending—"almost as—as a friend of the family."

"And isn't a friend, or an almost friend, entitled to give an opinion?"

Mrs. Barrett said nothing, her hands fluttered nervously.

"What I want to know"—Ann was undaunted—"why is it? Haven't we made Miss Edith comfortable? Has she a single complaint to bring against anyone of us?"

"Certainly not, Ann. That is, as far as I know. Indeed, I feel sure not."

"Then if she's happy with us—and she oughter

be—pampered, I call it—why does she want to run off with the first little light-haired simpleton as asks of her ? ”

Ann’s own lashes were light, a fact that may have subtly increased her bitterness.

“ Will you please remember, Ann, that Mr. Hendrey in the future will be a member of the family ? ”

“ As to that, as you know, there’s room to slip between cup and lip. Look at Master Rodney. She wasn’t for long to have and to hold, wasn’t Miss Wolney.”

“ That was all different. In many ways quite different. Miss Edith is old enough to know her own mind.”

“ He’s eighteen months and two days older, is Master Rodney. I got his age off the month nurse when first I came, I did. More’n a bit put about I was, with two babies and housework and all, and you yourself looking nobbut sickly.”

“ I was far from strong at the time.” Mrs. Barrett appeared to find a certain pleasure in the recollection.

“ And where you’d ’a been them days without me doesn’t bear thinking of.”

“ Where, indeed ? ” Mrs. Barrett agreed with constrained amiability.

“ And there was Master Rodney in his bit of a nightie standing up, hanging on to the foot of his cot, with his cheeks like roses——”

“ He was such a pretty baby.” Mrs. Barrett grew flushed and excited.

“ —And when he catched sight of me, he took and heaved his bottle—he’d sucked it dry, trust him,

the rascal—he heaved it at me, calling out, ‘yady, yady!’—which perhaps you’ll remember——”

Mrs. Barrett did, ecstatically.

“—Was his way of saying lady. And, bless him, he had my heart, he did, from that moment.” Ann lifted her apron to her eyes before she went on, “And what I was coming to, when you interrupted me——” When in a good humour Ann frequently forgot that Mrs. Barrett was her mistress; it was only when she was ‘put out’ that she laid punctilious stress on the distance between them, the frequency or infrequency of ‘ma’ams’ in her conversation being, indeed, of the nature of a mental barometer, indicating the state of her atmospheric pressure. “What I was coming to—no more and no less—was—if Miss Edith’s old enough to know her own mind, why isn’t Master Rodney, him being older?”

“You seem to forget—I hardly like to discuss it with you”—Ann snorted at the implied suggestion—“but Master Rodney was not the one to blame in that instance.”

Ann blew sharply through her nostrils.

“As though any woman in her right senses would give our young master the go-by! No, I’ve looked at it all sides, and it seems to me as he must have found out, some way, as she wasn’t what he wanted, or he just changed his mind—the best of men are that changeable—then he, being too much of a gentleman to cast a slur on a lady——”

“Um—um——” Mrs. Barrett assented.

“—He took and arst her, as you might say, to send in her resignation. Best so, too, to my way of thinking.”

"But, Ann, I thought you—er—approved of Miss Wolney?"

"I said she's a beautiful lady, and I'm not going against that opinion neither. But what I do *feel* is that she'd prove tame in the eating. And so, to my mind, Master Rodney's just as well 'shut' of her."

"Tameness might not be a bad thing in a wife though." Mrs. Barrett was in front of her glass, pegging down the thin iron-grey plaits that still, in old-fashioned style, composed her coiffure.

Ann shook her head.

"Men soon tire of mutton and potatoes; and, after a bit, of lamb and sparrowgrass. Miss Wolney's one as puts all her goods in the window."

"Nevertheless"—Mrs. Barrett dropped a hairpin, Ann pounced and returned it—"nevertheless, I cannot help seeing that Master Rodney's unhappy."

"Only becos' his pa's made him give up his nice clean drawing and go into that mucky business. Not but what," she hastened to add loyally, "it's a very good business, with lots of money in it; and them new cars with the cook in his whites, and the pots and pans shining and jingling makes me shocking proud when I sees 'em—Barrett's Brassyshine—and me, as you might say, in at the beginning. It's all right for us; but Master Rodney, he's been educated above pans and such-like. If I'd had my way he'd never have gone to Cambridge."

"He says he is quite happy down at the Works."

"He 'says.'" Ann accentuated the verb scornfully.

"I cannot persuade myself, all the same, that he *is* happy."

Ann looked over her mistress's shoulder. Her reflection was fingering one of its front teeth gingerly. It was a crowned one, Jeremiah had paid for it. Ann was intensely proud of it, but distrustful; she fingered it at intervals to see whether it was loosening, or perhaps only by habit when she was reflecting.

"You don't think," she suggested, "as Master Rodney's in love with some other young lady?"

"Of course not. Why ever should you think so?"

Ann assured herself the tooth betrayed no shadow of wavering before she replied:

"There was a young lady's portrait, leastways, one of those snap-shot thingamies, in Master Rodney's room when he came back from Cornwall. And it wasn't of Miss Wolney, neither. After he was engaged, I missed it. It's back again now. There may be something or nothing in it, just as you take it."

"And, Ann"—Mrs. Barrett's hands faltered and fluttered—"you don't know, I suppose, not that it matters—whose was the—er—portrait?"

"I mentioned no names."

Ann shut her mouth tightly.

Mrs. Barrett coloured as though she had been caught in an indiscretion. Her hair-dressing finished in silence, she made an excuse to send Ann away on an errand. That astute person saw through the device, but acquiesced with complacency. Since Rodney and Edith had outgrown the need for her services, Ann had gradually thrust her mistress into the place they had filled with their childhood; she humoured Mrs. Barrett and at the same time she ruled her.

As soon as the stairs had done answering to the quick short sound of Ann's footsteps, Mrs. Barrett crept away to her son's bedroom. Brassyshine swallowed him up at an early hour each morning, so there was no fear of finding Rodney in occupation.

For a moment she stood and looked round her shyly. To her gentle soul there seemed in her errand a touch of dishonour. The photograph left in his room could have nothing in it of secret, yet his mother knew, and was ashamed for the knowledge, that she would not openly have spoken of it.

She paused a moment, but curiosity conquered. It was necessary that she should know whose was the portrait her boy treasured.

Instinctively she went to a table at the bed-head. Some books were on it. Yeats' Poems, a pocket Richard Jefferies, the current number of *Punch*, a ragged Bible. This last Mrs. Barrett had given him when he left, solemn-eyed, greatly impressed with his own importance, for his first school. By the books was a glass with a single, dark red rose in it, and close to the flower the thing Mrs. Barrett was seeking. A photograph-frame containing a rough print of a girl in a sun-bonnet, rowing a boat; the face was in shadow; it was not at all a good photograph, but it probably showed more to Rodney than it did to his mother, and she was able to recognise Linda Ray beneath the sun-bonnet. Mrs. Barrett had lifted the frame—it was a small, cheap one; now she replaced it carefully at the same angle. Then she stood meek, hands folded, thinking.

It seemed to her that her son had strayed very far from her; dimly she realised a time would come

after all—might it not be better?—when he would have no need of her.

She turned away from the table, the rose and the photograph, and looked about her absentmindedly. Then little by little her gaze grew practical.

“It is time,” she said aloud, “this room was re-papered. I must speak to ‘Papa’ about it.”

CHAPTER XXXII

WITH REGRETS FOR THE HERO

"I HAVE come to congratulate you," said Cecil.

She did not like Edith's white room, it seemed to her cold and shivery. An impulsive bravado had urged her to congratulate Rodney's sister. She was beginning to wish she had not yielded to it. She reproached herself for stupidity.

On the mantelpiece was a photograph, the only one in the room. It was an enlargement, though Cecil knew nothing of that, of the one Rodney had given to Linda. The eyes smiled, but held a reserve that seemed to Cecil reproachful. She turned her back to the fireplace.

"I suppose," she said to Edith with the smile she knew how to make winning, "I suppose I *may* congratulate you."

Edith smiled back at her.

It is easy to be large-minded towards everyone when you are happy ; and besides, Edith may have felt an undercurrent of gratitude towards Cecil. It is true that Cecil had made Rodney unhappy, but then, it would have been so much worse had she made him happy.

"What, of course, I *do* mean"—Cecil grew nervous in face of Edith's serenity—"is that I congratulate Mr. Hendrey."

"I honestly hope he is to be congratulated," Edith answered, "but I suppose"—she fingered a ring, Bob's ring, a family one, thin and dim, but priceless to Edith—"I suppose you never do think so little of yourself as when you realise someone else thinks of you too highly."

"As to that"—Cecil laughed rather constrainedly—"the more anyone thinks of me, the more I am pleased with myself. I just worship flattery."

"Surely not, when you know it is flattery?"

"Rather! Not that I mind so much about flattery; but I like to know people think enough about me to take the trouble to flatter me."

"Did Rodney flatter you?" Edith asked unexpectedly.

Cecil crimsoned.

"Don't answer if you'd rather not," Edith told her.

"I don't mind, really. And the answer is 'yes' and 'no.' He did and he didn't. It wasn't flattery, you see, because he believed in it. He thought far too much of me. How it wearied me!"

"That was it, was it?"

"Yes, that was just it." Cecil spoke rapidly, glad to unburden herself. "It is so horrid, isn't it, to be thought better than you are? Because, I mean, naturally, you have to try and live up to it."

"Isn't that inspiring though?"

Cecil looked her surprise.

"Inspiring? To some people, perhaps. I found it depressing. It makes you wild with yourself. If I'm put out with myself, I'm horrid to everyone. My only chance is to be stroked the right way. I love myself then, and consequently love everyone."

"I call that a fool's paradise."

"What matter, so long as it *is* paradise to the one inside? It's those outside that talk about fools. And, when you come to think of it, fools are the really wise people.

"There are fools and fools." Edith's eyes were smiling.

"Monty calls Bob Hendrey a fool," Cecil told her.

"He would." Edith was quite untroubled. "And Bob thinks Monty Craig no end of a good fellow. Bob is just that sort of a fool," she added.

"He's shown his jolly good sense one way," Cecil said, with grudging admiration; "and, of course, everyone is wondering what you see in him."

"Just himself." Edith's eyes were laughing.

Cecil did not pursue the subject. She had a feeling she was on the edge of a place where it was wise not to venture. She had her moments of wisdom.

"I think," she said, "I should like you to know. I am going to marry Monty."

"Yes? I think you will be quite safe with him."

"*He* is contented with me as I am. He has to be."

"And you with him?"

"He is safe and commonplace, and with comfortable limitations. You don't mind, do you? You are so broadminded. Of course, we don't want it known at present. Monty says it wouldn't be decent. He's very fond, you know, of Rodney. He wouldn't like to hurt him. He was absurdly sore on that point. You don't feel sore about Rodney, do you?"

"Not sore exactly."

"Is he——?" Cecil, rising, inadvertently caught the look in the eyes of the portrait. It *was* reproachful. She turned away hurriedly. "You know what I mean," she amended. "You see, I was—I still am—very fond of Rodney."

"But surely—you can't want the two of them?"

The question was not in the best of taste. Cecil was quite gleeful over the thought—as coming from Edith.

"How stupid," she said. "Monty does just what I tell him."

"Is that his attraction?"

"Rather. You'll find the same thing with Bob Hendrey."

"No, I don't," Edith assured her. "Bob and I, we start as equals; independent, yet helping one another, not blind to one another's failings, each supplying what in the other is lacking."

"And you call that being in love?" Cecil asked, sneering.

"Not at all. We call it loving one another."

"Only a difference of words."

"Indeed, no. It goes deeper—to the very root of all things."

"I don't care for deepness and roots. I prefer the surface of things. Nearly everything is best on the surface—people most certainly. I expect if we could see into each other's minds, right down to the bottom, it would be beastly. Isn't it lucky we spend the greater part of our life in pretending?"

"I suppose we do; but I cannot see it is lucky."

"It is only children and old ladies that can safely

“speak the truth,” Cecil asserted. “And the children only whilst they are quite little. Of course, there are limits to the art of pretending. The balance has to be nicely adjusted. There was an overweight of pretence between me and Rodney.”

Though she kept her face turned from the portrait, she still seemed to see it, drawing her thoughts to Rodney. She was angered at it.

She looked at Edith.

“You haven’t answered my question. Or didn’t I ask it? Do you think that Rodney will be all right again soon? I mean—is he desperately unhappy?”

“How do I know? I cannot see far with Rodney; perhaps, because I love him.”

“I thought that was supposed to make you clear-sighted.”

“When you love—I think a mist arises.”

“Thank Heaven, then, Monty and I are not bothered with it. We see each other jolly plainly. There is nothing to dread in our eyes being opened.” Then, against her will, drawn back to that she tried to avoid: “You don’t think, do you, that Rodney has any ill-feeling towards me? I’m fond of him still, in a way, and I wouldn’t like—you don’t think he really dislikes me?”

“Oh, no,” Edith answered readily.

“Does he talk ever about me?”

“He said that he wished you all happiness.”

Cecil looked disappointed. She would have been shocked at any suggestion of cruelty, yet she liked to think in a sentimental and not altogether unpleasant way that she had made Rodney unhappy.

“Don’t you get tired of this room?” she asked

Edith suddenly. "There is so little colour. I like crowds of colour."

"When colours are crowded they lose all their value. I find the grey shadows in this room most restful."

"I loathe things that are restful."

"Mayn't that be because as yet you have no right to them?"

"Do you talk like that to Bob Hendrey?"

"How do you talk to Montague Craig?"

"Just as it happens. But you are far too clever to let a conversation 'happen.' Why are you smiling?"

"Because I am amused at your conception of me."

"Isn't it true?"

"How can I tell? I know it is not my own conception. Yet either or neither or both can be true. How can I tell?"

"Do you know," Cecil said quite earnestly, "I am so glad to find there's something about which you are not certain? I always have looked upon you as one of the cocksure people. I am glad you are not though."

"So am I. To be cocksure means to be in a blind alley. I believe in going on learning."

"I always hated learning. At school I mean. I was so glad when I left to think that all was done with. Not that I bothered much. Linda used to. I couldn't see the point of it. I used to say, 'Top or bottom, what will it matter a few years hence'? Does it matter at all, now, really?"

"And what did she answer?"

"She used to be troubled and say that we were

sent to school to learn, and that, anyhow, it was our duty to try as hard as we could. I always loathed duty."

"Perhaps only because someone has given an awkward name to a thing of beauty."

"I don't see that."

"Duty is the fulfilling of the law, so also is love," said Edith.

"Don't you get tangled up—I suppose you don't, but I do—thinking about what things are, and what we ought to do and think about them? I like to go on, jolly and ready for anything. When I first knew him, Rodney was just the same. I thought it would be perfectly ripping to stick together and make fun of everything. We might have had such grand adventures."

"And now?"

"Oh, I don't think Monty is at all adventurous. Edith—you don't mind my calling you Edith?—you can understand how I mean it—do you think that, after a bit, he'll—I mean Rodney, of course—that he'll—well—what they call—it's beastly, but I don't know how else to express it—that he'll console himself—get fond of somebody else?"

"Men do, usually."

"But Rodney's not a 'usually' sort. I'd like to think he would though. Not yet, but some time. I think I'd prefer it to be a stranger; someone he's not met at present. It's rather beastly of me, but I'm horribly jealous—I've always known it—I don't pretend to be perfect—but I'd rather, somehow—it would make it harder for me—if in the end it should turn out to be Linda——"

Edith's face suddenly hardened. For the moment

there was a look in it of Rodney, or of her father. When she spoke, her voice had a deeper note than was usual.

"Why should you think of your friend Linda Ray in such a fashion?"

"I don't know. Perhaps because Rodney once said she was 'oddly fascinating.' At the time I did not half like it. He knew her, you see, down in Cornwall. What do you think? They met here the other day, didn't they?"

By the careless 'they met here' Edith's eyes were opened as to the real object of Cecil's visit.

"Yes, they met here. Rodney was talking of something he had heard. His drawings are likely to be chosen for the Scottish contract. He was questioning what he ought to do, should it be offered him." Edith's words were cold and restrained.

But Cecil broke out, warmly, eagerly:

"Why, of course, he would take it, and hang Brassyshine." Then she added, with a sudden pang of jealousy, "What has Linda to say about it?"

"Nothing."

"How odd of her. Rather rude I call it, seeing they are supposed to be such friends." In spite of the venom of her words, Cecil wore rather a pleased expression.

"I cannot help thinking"—Edith spoke slowly almost as though to herself—"I cannot help thinking that for some reason Linda is displeased with Rodney. She was so cold, so constrained in her manner towards him."

"She is a loyal little thing, devoted to me." Cecil was glibly explanatory.

"I have an idea, perhaps Rodney has also, that Linda holds him to blame for the broken engagement. If this is so, it is perhaps natural that she should take no interest in his future now that it does not affect your happiness."

"Just like dear old Linda," Cecil said warmly. "I always *have* told her she thinks a great deal too much of me."

"You don't find it becomes irksome?"

"You don't with a girl. A girl never matters. So Linda showed Rodney she was a bit vexed with him?" Cecil was looking quite radiant.

"It may have been only my fancy."

"Hardly, seeing she refused to rise to the bait of his profession," she laughed. "I dare say he'll get over that. Still, I do think Linda might have been outwardly friendly."

"Carried on the usual round of pretence?" Edith was pleased to be scornful.

Cecil was unimpressed.

"Yes, carried on the jolly old round that after all makes things jog along cheerily. Well, I really must be moving." She offered a rose-blossom cheek. "Do you know, I'm quite sorry that 'after all' we are not going to be sisters."

"Is that part of the 'jolly old round'?"

"Not a bit. For once I am perfectly genuine. We should be such excellent foils for one another, dear, shouldn't we?"

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE HERO WITHOUT ANY HALO

It was with an air of mild reproach that the big Victorian house received Linda. She felt it was justified. She and Cecil had not played the game exactly. Yet—did it matter? For herself, she was passing away, out of the ken of the house, out of reach of the strangely assorted, oddly stimulating family it sheltered; those people, that whether or no she acknowledged it, had a charm for her just because they were Rodney's.

She had come to say good-bye to the Baretts, and suddenly it seemed a hard thing she had undertaken. Yet she knew it would be better, far better that she should go back to Aunt Emma, away from all these broken reflections of life among which during the last few weeks she had, as it seemed, aimlessly floundered.

She had a sick longing to hear once again the long pounding roar and the falling hush of the ocean. Surely peace waited, or some workable semblance of peace, down in Cornwall.

The blue rep drawing-room of the Baretts accepted her. It was too hospitable to do otherwise, yet Linda felt a subtle reproach in its aspect. The gilt clock under the glass case was silent, the hydrocephalous cupid hung motionless. The room was

silent, close, stagnant, withdrawn on itself reservedly. Once it had expanded towards her hospitably, only to find her unworthy of its ponderous confidence. It had taken an air of dignified suffering.

"It is not my fault. I could not help it." Linda stayed the words on her lips.

In its profound displeasure the room was impregnable.

Overhead passed stealthy footsteps. There was movement of drawers and wardrobes. Mrs. Barrett was preparing herself for callers.

"And it's only me," Linda murmured drearily.

It seemed so unnecessary anyone should trouble about what she thought of them; and she wanted to get this thing over, to say good-bye to everyone and to get back to Cornwall.

The sea-birds would be dipping and soaring, falling with high spirt of foam into the blue of the water. The grim grey cliffs would nurse in their clefts fallen stars of flower-spangles. The air would blow keen and careless, with salt and the scent of wild thyme in it. Her longing to be there was overpowering; almost, it seemed, that once in touch with the ocean she would find herself back in the old uncomplicated existence. As well might the butterfly after long adventurous flight expect to fold its frayed wings again in the chrysalis.

Voices drew near, a hesitating murmur, with harsher intervals, from one of which broke out clearly:

"No, m'am, Mr. Bentham says, plain as anything, Miss Wolney's not with her, it's only that nice little Miss Ray."

'That nice little Miss Ray.'

Though the speaker was probably only some confidential servant, Linda felt less disheartened.

Mrs. Barrett looked very small in the big solemn doorway, and a little frightened. She hated every sort of unpleasantness, and she felt the family connection with the Wolneys, amongst whom she included Linda, had been on the whole unpleasant. She made an attempt at a high standpoint, fluttered a little, and fell below her usual mild dignity. The moment was awkward. Linda found herself wishing, with more intensity than she had hoped ever now to attain to, that she had not ventured the visit. From that she slipped to a sick hope that Mrs. Barrett suspected nothing concerning her personality. She knew that the claws of the tamest of mothers can be unsheathed in defence of her offspring. Linda knew herself incapable of that attitude known as 'designing'; yet 'designing' might be Mrs. Barrett's word for her. In spite of the harsh voice's remark concerning 'that nice little Miss Ray,' it was more than possible Mrs. Barrett's own word was 'designing.'

"I have just come to say good-bye," she faltered.

At the word, Mrs. Barrett's smile was turned on with a jerk, and she was all affability.

"So your stay has come to an end, and you are going home—Cornwall, isn't it?"

"Cornwall," stammered Linda. It seemed a desecration to say it.

"So pleasant there, the sea and the boating." The photograph in her son's room was very present with Mrs. Barrett. Girls rowing! She was not sure she approved of it.

There was a tight feeling in Linda's throat as she murmured :

" Yes, and the boating."

And then an awful silence settled heavily down between the pair of them. By the intuition of her sex each knew the other was thinking of Rodney, each wished the other would speak, and neither could say anything.

Mrs. Barrett sat rigid, her pale eyes staring. Linda glanced restlessly round the great room. The blue rep was self-satisfied, unresponsive ; the dangling yellow tassels on the silly sofa bolsters annoyed her. Then, with a sudden stab of the heart, she saw Mrs. Barrett was crying.

" Don't—please, don't," she entreated.

" It—I don't know why——" From long force of habit Mrs. Barrett fumbled helplessly where her pocket was not. Two tears had fallen on the mauve silk of her dressmaker's latest creation ; through the next two she looked about helplessly for the vanity-bag that ought to be somewhere.

Awkwardly, almost guiltily, Linda offered her handkerchief. With a wan smile Mrs. Barrett took it, murmuring :

" And it's all so stupid."

The truth of the words smote Linda with sudden heartiness. It *was* all so stupid—this doing without pockets, making apologies for the god-sent relief of tears ; the whole round of pretence. It was all so stupid.

She took Mrs. Barrett's hands in hers, they must have been pretty once—before years of rough work had spoilt them.

"Don't cry, dear," she said gently; "I mean, do cry, if it makes you feel better."

Mrs. Barrett sniffed, and her thin bosom rose and fell under the mauve gown spasmodically.

"My dear, you are understanding. You are not hard, like Edith."

"Edith is not hard," Linda started out warmly, but tailed away into, "is she?"

"She can't understand." Mrs. Barrett was sobbing and sniffing, and already Linda's handkerchief was a tiny wet ball of unpleasantness. "All her life has been pleasant. Easy-sailing, though you might not think it, makes people hard. What they have not felt themselves they are annoyed with others for feeling. So far for Edith it has all been easy-sailing."

"You don't grudge her that?" Linda questioned.

"No, love; in a way it has been my own doing. We deny ourselves—no one but a mother knows how we deny ourselves for our children. And we think, I suppose, they will develop self-denial automatically by suggestion. Edith has a great deal to learn, and, as likely as not, she never will learn it."

"But she is so clever."

"To be clever is not to know, only to be capable of knowing. Just as to be lovable is not necessarily to be loved—or, how about my poor Rodney? My dear, any woman ought to go down on her knees and thank God for the mere chance of loving him. And then—see how Cecil——" She choked. "She is your friend though—I will say nothing against her."

Almost fiercely Mrs. Barrett applied the useless handkerchief to her eyes and nostrils. It seemed as she did so that a wall of ice formed between

Linda and Rodney's mother. She felt awkward, unseemly, kneeling down as she was in the midst of the solemn rep furniture.

More plainly than before she noted the stubbed nails and work-hardened creases of the fluttering hands she had just been caressing.

"The worst of it is"—Mrs. Barrett pressed both of her palms tightly over the handkerchief—"I feel it is all our fault—'Papa's' fault, that is—all this has happened. It was not the right moment—I see that so clearly—to claim the poor boy for the business. It should have been sooner or a bit later. Before his engagement, or not till after the marriage. I do see—I can see—I trust I am not narrow-minded—that the position was a hard one for Cecil Wolney. Still—I do think—had she been a true woman—that she might have risen above it."

"She would"—the words were forced out from Linda—"she would—if only she had loved him."

Mrs. Barrett looked at her surprised, reproachful.

"You don't think—you don't really mean—that she did not love him."

Linda reddened.

"She wanted to sacrifice him to herself," she said thickly.

Mrs. Barrett sat rigid, staring, rolling the wet handkerchief more and more tightly. At last she said—her lips were twitching:

"I am afraid sacrifice has gone out of fashion. Time was when women sought it. And now Edith tells me that a woman, no more than a man, has a right to sacrifice her individuality."

"Not to ennoble it?" cried Linda with sudden insight.

Mrs. Barrett shook her head sadly.

"In my day it was all so much simpler. We all fell in love so readily. A little thing was enough, our steps at a dance went together, or his whiskers it might be, or just because he said he loved you. There was no chance of really knowing him till you were engaged to him ; and not very much then for those who observed the proprieties. And then you were married——"

"How dreadful !" said Linda.

"Not at all, dear. It had to be faced. Like the plunge of sea-bathing."

"And then after—— ? " Linda's eyes had darkened.

"You came up blinded and a little bit breathless and then settled down to the unalterable."

"Did they always ? "

"Almost always." Mrs. Barrett tightened her thin little lips. Young girls should not ask too many questions.

Linda thought for a minute, then she said :

"I think I rather wish I had lived then."

It all seemed so much easier. The little fluttering admiration. No heart could really be wrung about a man's dancing steps or his whiskers—the momentary plunge—all the others had taken it !—then the mild soporific existence amongst highly respectable Victorian surroundings.

"Yes," she said, "I think it was better."

"Believe me, it was love."

Mrs. Barrett began to spread the moist handkerchief out on her knee ; she was feeling almost cheerful. After all the thorny discomfort of Edith's tenacious opinions it was something to have found

someone in this new generation sufficiently clear-eyed to recognise the obvious truth that the bygone days were better.

"Nowadays," she went on didactically, "young girls give far too much to the men; they write to them, not to one only, but many: they exchange photographs; go about without chaperons; borrow books which no one of experience has a chance of supervising; talk of the most *impossible* things quite freely. It is really no wonder the percentage of marriages is rapidly declining. The old ways—our ways—were far better. They knew so little of us that"—she smiled archly—"they thought we were angels."

"Yet," Linda stated, "the reason Cecil broke off with—your son—was because he thought too well of her."

Mrs. Barrett's jaw dropped.

"I can't understand—no, dear—you must be mistaken—no girl could possibly——"

"Cecil did," Linda assured her.

Mrs. Barrett drew herself up with faded dignity.

"Then I can only say I am glad my son escaped an alliance with anyone so—unnatural."

Linda was fumbling for a suitable explanation, one that could enter the very small aperture in the wall Mrs. Barrett had laboriously erected in front of her mind during long years of unintelligent routine, when there came a not unwelcome interruption.

The handle of the door excited itself in a way quite foreign to its gilt-bordered propriety, there was a heavy flat-hand thump on the mahogany panel, and a voice cried :

"Hullo! you there, 'Mamma'? Is it private, or may I come in? I've got news for you."

Almost at once appeared Jeremiah's flushed face and shining dark eyes.

"So it's *you*, little lady." His welcome to Linda was evidently genuine. "Just in time you are to share our pleasure." A telegram was in his hand.

Mrs. Barrett glanced at it apprehensively. In her day, when things moved more slowly, a flimsy brown envelope was usually the presage of death or disaster. Like a big, jolly boy, Jeremiah waved it at her.

"Rodney's done it this time," he fairly bellowed. "Got the job—knocked all the others into a cocked-hat—our Rodney, Hundred-thousand pound job, and all——"

"And how much goes to the architect?" Mrs. Barrett was immediately practical.

"That I can't say"—Jeremiah smoothed his grey locks complacently—"a good bit, I *dare* say, seeing there'd be no job at all without him. I just dropped into the Club with this, it didn't take me more'n the inside of a minute, and the chaps there say Rod's a made man right enough now. A big job like this straight away'll make him. Little Rodney, 'Mamma,' that I've smacked and I've tickled——"

At which his 'spouse' looked at him admonishingly with a side glance in Linda's direction.

Jeremiah laughed jollily.

"Bless you, 'Mamma,' lasses nowadays are not so dashed particular. Shows their sense, too, bless 'em." His laughter rose to a roar. "Hang it all!" he burst out, "I take it young madam won't be

so cock-a-hoop now that she gave the go-by to our Rodney. What have *you* got to say, little lady ? ”

He handed the ‘ wire ’ to Linda.

She was glad of the momentary pause afforded her whilst she read it. The immediate result of this thing seemed to set Rodney farther than ever away from her. She was glad for him, very, very glad for him—and yet—it was foolish of her, she knew it—yet women, some women, will always create out of the man they love—perhaps all the more if he be not for them—a hero. Rodney, giving up the work he loved, taking his coat off, going to the help of his father, expanded heroically. But a successful architect, congratulated, monied—— ! She folded the paper in silence.

“ Well ? ” said old Barrett expectantly.

In the continued silence Linda felt that the solemn self-centred room with all its florid contents, and in especial the mute clock, with ponderous interest awaited her answer.

She raised her eyes to Jeremiah’s bright ones and asked slowly :

“ What does—your son say about it ? ”

“ Very little, I’m bound to say—very little.” The old man fingered his side-lock. “ He was at the Works—muck up to his eyes, he was. So I read it out to him. ‘ What ho ? ’ I asked him. ‘ Right, Dad, that’ll wait,’ he answered. ‘ I can’t leave my first boiling of Brassyshine.’ Lord ! didn’t I fair love the lad for it. A hundred-thousand pound contract and he never turns a hair, only—‘ I can’t spoil my first boiling of Brassyshine.’ ” He laughed out uproariously.

His wife did not echo his mirth; she looked startled, timorous; she spoke shrilly:

"You don't mean—you can't mean—that he'll throw up this chance—the chance of a lifetime. What did he say about it?"

"I've told you just what he said." The old man had sobered; quite unnecessarily he was fitting the paper into its brown envelope; suddenly, he turned his bright eyes on Linda.

"And what do *you* think he'll do about it?"

Linda paled, but she forced the words out bravely.

"He will stand by you and Brassyshine."

"Shake," said the old man, extending a hairy paw.

As they shook, his bright dark eyes looked deep into her velvety blue ones.

"Yes," said Jeremiah, "that's just what he's game for—Rodney." Then he laughed. "After all, though, mine's the last word in the matter."

CHAPTER XXXIV

IN WHICH THE HERO ALL BUT ENTERS

THE window was open wide ; through it came the breath of the heather, the scent of thyme, and the cool, dank touch of the ocean. Linda filled her lungs ecstatically. This was the Life-spark, the spirit, the soul of the homeland.

A blackbird fluted loudly. *Hush—hush*—droned the sea at the cliff-foot. The blackbird, undaunted, fluted again ; his mate answered—a flurried feminine note ; from above, a lark's song was throbbing. The mist of the past night was only now clearing ; bright drops hung yet on the crimson buds of the tree-fuchsias and the stiff foliage of purple veronica all bent one way by the constant push of the sea-wind. Above the crimson and purple was the vast stretch of ocean, vividly blue with long streaks of green, and purple shadows and silver gleams in it, and the clear blue sky over it. A crude scheme of colour it was, but Linda's heart leapt to it. It was Cornwall, harsh, acute, yet with something appealing, like the unending scream of the sea-birds ; and yet something satisfying as the never-ceasing *hush—hush* at the foot of the cliffs of granite. The morning was early still, and the sun glittered on everything.

Linda came away from the window. After the

big, handsome guest-chamber she had used at the Wolneys,' the little home-room seemed oddly cramped and low-ceilinged ; but dear with the exquisite dearness of the familiar few who understand us and with whom there is no need of pretending. A yellow sun-ray stretched across the white window-sill ; a faint green light danced on the ceiling.

Linda opened her locked writing-case and drew out some papers. As she touched them her fingers trembled, yet she smiled as you do over flowers pressed between the leaves of a book, sometimes.

" How blind I was," she said softly.

On the first paper was a date two days old, the night of her arrival in Cornwall. She began to read what was written :

It is all over now—over and buried. I must go back, as mourners do after the funeral, to take up life again as far as it is possible. They are better off, though, than I am ; for they may think, perhaps talk in whispers, of their buried dear one. I must not talk, may not even think of That I have buried. Only to you, Mother—to you this once. And then I promise I will be good and so patient.

There is Aunt Emma. She seems older, somehow, much older than I thought she was ; humdrum and rather stupid. She was pleased, in a mild sort of way, to see me ; but she has got on very well without me. I must try and make myself of more use to her, so that in time she will need me. I want so much to be needed. That sounds selfish. I think when you are broken and sad you are apt to be selfish. I will fight against it.

Aunt Emma said London had not agreed with me. 'It is the ghost of the Linda we sent them.' She said it quite cheerfully, as though it were of little consequence. I was silly enough to be glad that I showed the marks of my suffering. It may shorten things for me.

But I don't want to make poor Aunt Emma unhappy. I want to cheer her—not but what she is always cheerful.

How do older people manage it? Have they not suffered, or have they left it behind them as you do measles or chicken-pox?

Later, Aunt Emma had been laughing over the things I was telling her, and she said, as she wiped her glasses :

'Bless the child, she was always a bit of quicksilver; but she's come back better company than ever.'

It is nice to know I can cheer Aunt Emma. Not that, as I say, she needs it at present. She is so jolly and energetic, and takes so much interest in everything. Only by and by, when she gets older and has rheumatism or something, she may want cheering. I suppose you have to be patient even for the chance of cheering someone.

It seems so far off now, London and all of it. I don't feel quite sure whether it is all true or whether I dreamt it. I wish, how I wish, I could wake up from it, and find myself back at Rodney's last night in Cornwall, the night I cried—little silly—because I thought I knew what it was to be unhappy.

I must leave all that now. It is the new life I

must face. The new life that is only the old with all the zest gone out of it.

I am ready for it. It will be something to do, setting my face forward, forgetting—no, not forgetting, but preventing myself looking into the closed pages of the past. There will be books to read. I wonder, do the dear people who write them realise how much they help us in our forgetting?

There is the garden—Aunt Emma does so much in it, and I am sure she is too stout for the stooping—I shall be able to find occupation—work of all sorts in plenty.

Mother dear, you won't have to grieve over me.

Cecil and Montague came with me to the station. I really think they are happy together; he is fond of her in a quiet, sensible way, and she teases him, and he seems to like it.

They came to the station with me, but had to leave early because of some Charity Concert. So they saw me into a through carriage and Montague piled the opposite seat with papers and chocolates, and fruit and flowers from the stall on the platform. Cecil will have a generous husband. As they went off Cecil waved, he lifted his hat. And I went out of their life altogether.

I felt like some old-time sailor—'marooned,' didn't they call it?—on a desert island. All the noise and bustle of the station seemed dim and unreal about me. In all my life never have I felt quite so lonely. And yet I was glad of the peace. It seemed I had got to the end of all suffering. Lonely and peaceful I was—as the dead are—when we leave them.

It was just then I saw him coming. I suppose

he happened to be on the station and met Cecil and Montague, and they must have told him—happy people are thoughtless—where I was—that I was going.

We don't stir the dead up to life again, Mother; we leave them.

He came and spoke to me. I answered naturally. It was just possible, quite on the surface. And I longed for the train to start—longed that it would stay—stay for ever—that I might stand there for ever with the keen sharp cut of the knowledge that I was looking my last on Rodney.

I don't think I really was looking at him; he did not look at me, I know that much. I wish I knew how I have offended him. Or has someone said something? Or is it, as I thought once before, that he has surprised my secret?

I don't believe that I mind much really even if he has done so. It is only convention makes a woman look on her love as a thing to be hidden whilst a man wears his proudly. I am proud that I love him.

I love him, Mother! nothing can take that from me. To love—that is the great thing, isn't it? Nothing else matters. You knew that. That is why you lived so short a time after my father that I have no recollection of either of you.

Mother, I don't think there is any need to pity you. You loved and were loved. I am content with less. I am not to be pitied, no one must pity me, because I love Rodney.

Surely that ought to be enough for any woman. Why isn't it?

As we were talking I saw him glance at the

things on the seat opposite. They seemed so lavish and unusable and unnecessary. And he said, 'Is there anything——?'

I laughed—I could, actually—it struck me as rather wonderful. But oh! how I wished Montague had given me nothing so that I might have asked—I should have treasured even a newspaper.

He took my hand just as the train started.

I expect he was just as glad as I was—only I wasn't glad, really—that it was over.

His lips moved, he was saying something. But at that very moment an engine on the other side of the platform let off steam with a roar that was deafening.

I could not hear what he said. I tried hard to do lip-reading, and thought I recognised the word 'Cornwall.' Very likely I was mistaken, or if not, it was no doubt some commonplace about a safe journey. Yet I should have liked to have heard it. It was mine, and the noise took it. The last thing he said to me; and now I shall never know it.

He held my hand a moment after the train had started and looked up at me. There was something in his eyes—pity? reproach? what was it?

I do not know. Never shall now.

Mother, I do mean to be brave. Life can't be utterly dreary if you spend it on others.

There is Aunt Emma—Mother! how can I bear it?

Linda read through the close, even writing to the end, then her lips trembled into a smile.

"Mother," she said aloud, "your poor little fool of a daughter!"

Then she sat down, and still smiling slightly, dipped a pen, drew the paper nearer, and began to write. As she wrote she was conscious of the lark's throbbing song, of the blackbird's homely fluting, the scream of the gulls, and the low *hush—hush* of the ocean. It was life calling, and her heart answered.

Mother, dear Mother—it was all a mistake ; did you know it ?

How can I tell you ?

It is simple enough, yet so very wonderful.

From the very first moment he loved me.

And he thought honour bound him to Cecil.

And that accounts for the second time, when she met him.

I've no need to say more. Does it matter ?

I have those last words of his now. Only they are not the last by any means. He said :

' Don't be surprised if you see me in Cornwall.'

He says I looked at him so blankly, he almost despaired of me.

It was all that horrid engine.

He thought I had not forgiven him about Cecil. He almost made up his mind to emigrate.

But the very next day, yesterday, only yesterday, and it seems ages ago already, he came down to Cornwall.

It was a most glorious evening.

I shall never—and he says so too—forget the sunset.

She stopped, put down her pen, and ran to the

window. She thrust her head out, and the sun caught her and kissed her.

"I did not expect you so early," she called out.

"I'm coming. I won't be half a minute."

A low, happy laugh came up out of the garden.

THE END

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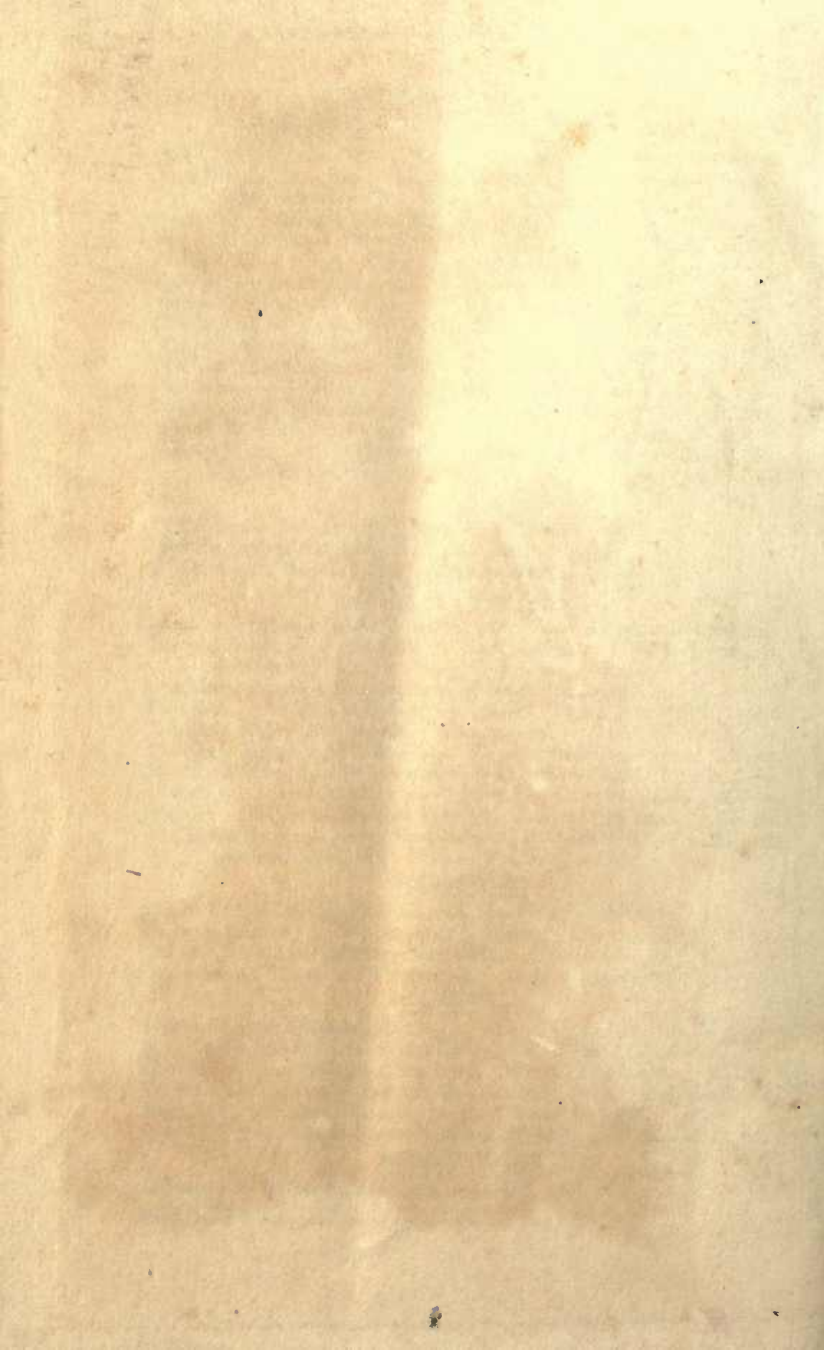
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